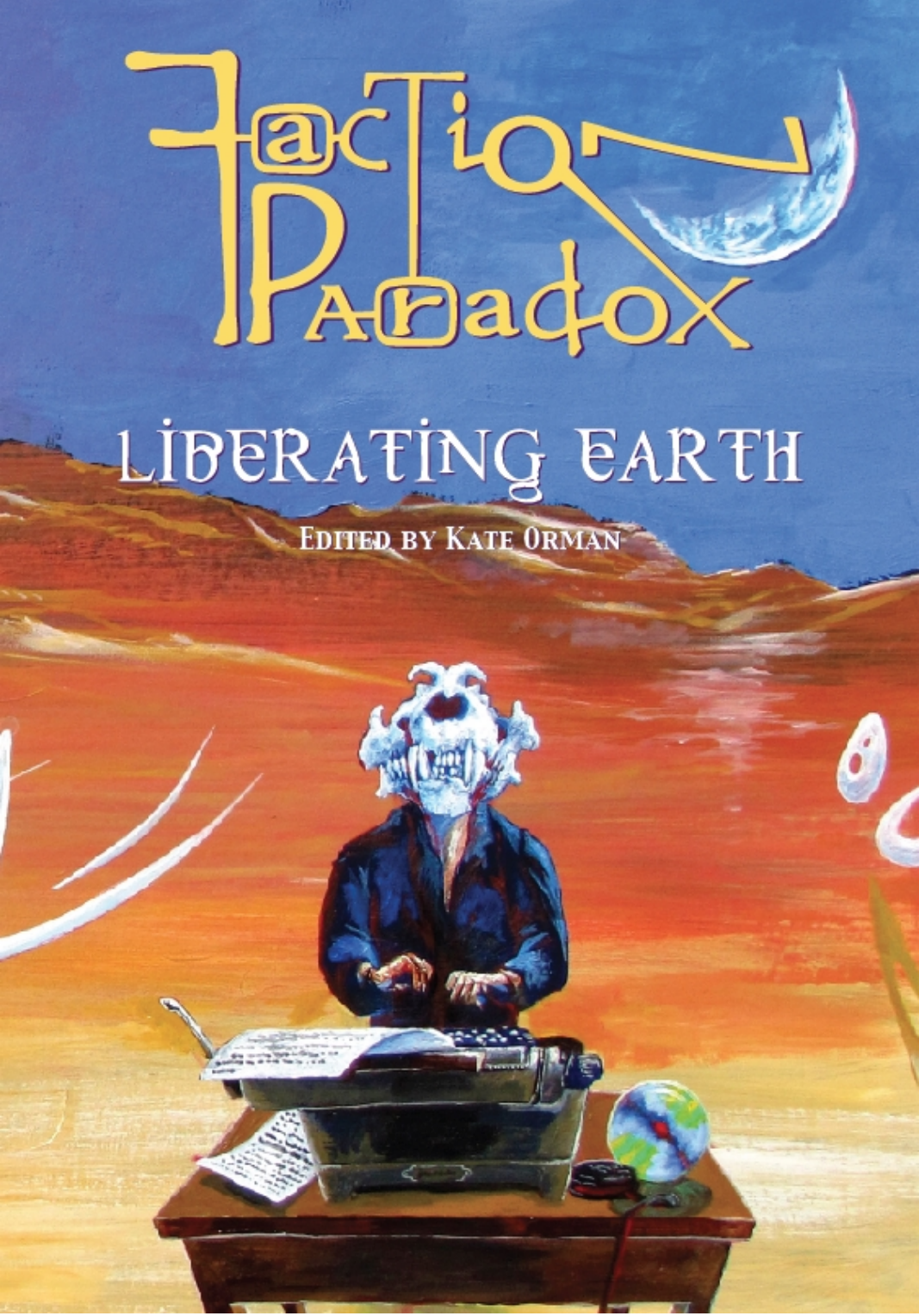
Factio Paradox

Liberating Earth

Edited by Kate Orman



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Editor's Note

In the 1953 short story "The Liberation of Earth" by William Tenn, two warring alien species take turns "liberating" planet Earth from each other, until the planet is destroyed. Tenn was satirising the Cold War, and the way the superpowers, vying with each other for territory, insisted that it was all for the inhabitants' own good.

This anthology pits two Cousins from Faction Paradox against each other in a game of alternative universes. They take turns at creating Earths which have been conquered and colonised by different sets of invaders, on which human beings are at best second-class citizens, and at worst slaves.

Why is *Liberating Earth* entirely written by women? Most of the writers published by Obverse so far have been men. An all-woman anthology seemed like the simplest way to circumvent whatever barriers were preventing Obverse from connecting with talented women. I'm especially proud that this book marks several women's first time in print.

My own story, "Playing for Time", describes the deadly game between Tefen and Triphis. It forms a framework for the other stories in the collection. There are three ways you can read it: as a story in its own right, straight through; as chapters in between the other stories; or, if you prefer, not at all – the individual stories are self-contained, and you don't need to read "Playing For Time" to understand and enjoy them.

Kate Orman
June 2014

Playing For Time I

This isn't the first time Tefen has been in trouble. It's not the first time he's seen the inside of Mrs. Triphis' office, either. The carpet is three inches thick. The tips of Tefen's boots left a double trail through it as the twin security drones dragged him in. Now he stands at the end of his skidmark, pinched between the guards, glaring at the crimson pile.

The security men wear identical black suits and have the same haircut. Their dark glasses flicker softly with heads-up displays. He can't remember their names. 'Which one of you is Mr. Park?' he asks. They both turn to look at him, but they don't answer. They haven't said a word the entire time. Maybe they're both called Mr. Park.

He's starting to think this might be serious.

The windows have been blanketed with red and orange drapery. The only light is the reading lamps and the computer monitors on the desk - real wood, carved with spidery designs. There are a handful of ornaments scattered about the room, all shimmering silver, all new as the day they were made – proto-Elamite, pre-Columbian. She loves to be surrounded by beautiful things, does our Triphis. Beautiful, but sadly neglected.

He looks up as one of the side doors slides open, but it's not Mrs. Triphis, it's a third suit from security. This one's a woman, and she's carrying something long, wrapped in a tasselled shawl. She hasn't got anything to say, either – she just stands there.

'Look,' says Tefen. 'I've been waiting here for more than an hour.'

Suddenly, Mr. Park and Mr. Park have got him by the arms, and they've shoved him down on his knees.

Mrs. Triphis makes her entrance. Tefen gawps. It isn't the mask that throws him, the Coelophysis skull on its oval of red velvet. It's that instead of a prim business suit or a chiffon kemis, she's wearing nothing at all but a black leather butcher's apron.

'I'm told you've been rummaging about in my drawers, you naughty little thing.'

The security woman carefully unwraps the object she's carrying. It glitters horrifyingly in the dim light, and Tefen gets the first inkling of how much trouble he's actually in. He swallows hard, over and over, the topmost of the tight straps crossing his jacket pressing

against his Adam's apple. Is that why the carpet's this colour – so the stains won't show?

'Oh, fuck,' he says.

'That's the spirit!' Triphis perches on the edge of her desk, crossing her legs girlishly. 'What have you been up to? I want a full and frank confession, my little trinket, or you and my head woman are going to have a short, sharp conversation.' The silent woman with the sword stands ready, the shawl draped neatly around her shoulders. 'You know I can't stand fibbers.'

The Parks let go of his arms. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Tefen kneels with his hands on his knees, takes a deep breath, and looks her in her bony eye. 'I get bored.'

'Bored!' says Triphis.

'There are a lot of hours in the day when I don't have anything to do. I ran out of places on the ship I hadn't already visited, so of course I started sneaking in where I wasn't supposed to be.'

'You utter brat. Go on.'

'I don't mean to piss off Mr. Park and his pals,' says Tefen, 'but your security isn't up to scratch.'

'You know I don't employ you for your mechanical skills,' says Triphis. 'Or to test my security.'

'You own so many remarkable objects – you must know how much potential is trapped inside some of those things. Beautiful things! Just waiting for someone to recognise them for what they are. All the chronomasticon needs is the gentlest touch -'

'Say that again.'

Tefen stammers, 'All the chronomasticon –'

'You found a chronomasticon.'

'Yes.'

'On my ship.'

'Yes.'

'I'll have those cataloguers revivified as slime moulds,' grumbles Triphis. 'Do you know how long I've been looking for a chronomasticon?' She leans down, putting her hands on her knees, pushing her skull-mask close to his naked face. The mask is no fossil; it's real dinosaur bone, lacquered ghost-white. 'You'd better be sure.'

'Well of course I'm sure! It's not the sort of thing you can mistake for something else, is it?'

'I've been looking for one,' says Triphis, 'because of that.' She walks

to her desk, pushes a button, and one of the vermilion curtain rolls silently aside, showing the black sky half-filled with the shockingly bright colours of planet Earth.

She gestures, and the drones release their painful grip on Tefen's shoulders. He joins Triphis at the window. From here you can see the long axis of her ship, a trail of shimmering bubbles, some small as rooms, some big as buildings, a few transparent, most kaleidoscoping gorgeously like oil on a wet road.

'When are we?' he asks.

'Mid-third millennium BCE,' says Triphis. 'They haven't even built the pyramids yet.' South America is directly below them, dazzling. 'There are Martians down there right now telling outrageous porkies to the Norte Chico.' Tefen laughs politely. 'Down there, it's all getting started. All those groups of human beings aren't satisfied with their own little bit of planet any more. They're not just expanding and exploring – they're turning to armed robbery. Greedy, greedy gluttons. Quite quenchless. And full of rationalisations and lies. They've got the bow and arrow now. Soon they'll have the chariot and the battering ram, and the gun and the mine and the bomb. Enough will never be enough for us, ever again.'

'You're an idealist,' says Tefen.

'An idealist is someone who believes in a world that could never happen,' sniffs Triphis. 'With a chronomasticon there's no such thing as a world that could never happen.'

'You'll have to do more than tweak the timelines to create an Earth without war. You'd have to revivify the whole human race into something less… I think the word I'm looking for is "insatiable".' He winks at her.

'Cheeky tchotchke!' she says. 'The human race had every opportunity. We blew it. Darling, frankly, we don't have it in us to run a planet. Somebody else should be given a go.'

Tefen lets a slow, wicked smile drift over his face. 'There's more to the chronomasticon than a catalogue of the touch-points between different histories,' he says. 'It also lists the intersections between different laws of reality.'

'Gravity and things?'

'Much more basic than that.'

'What's more basic than the laws of physics?'

'Maths. Logic. The causal nexus.'

'I love it when you talk dirty.'

At last Tefen feels like he can relax a little. She's sold. He steps up behind her, slowly so as not to worry the security, and presses his strap-crossed chest against her naked back. 'Plus we're in the best possible position to put it to use. We can pick one of those unstable points, travel right there, and give it a good kick. Anyone else would only be able to affect local, um, loci. If you think someone else should be in charge down there, that someone is limited only by your flourishing imagination.'

'Essentially,' says Triphis, 'You're selling me the history of Earth to save your own small but perfectly formed arse.'

Tefen grins into her ear. 'Give it a twist, a flick of the wrist.'

Dreamer in the Dark
E H Timms

I heard the footsteps first, then the ongoing whisper like breath sucked through teeth.

'Down!' I cried to the workers behind me in the field. The cry finished in a grunt of air as I followed my own order and dropped face down, pressing my forehead into the stubble and dirt and screwing my eyes tight shut against the approach of a mistress. Right arm extended, palm uppermost so that the mistress could read my identification chip, I waited, trying to stop the sound of my heart and breathing overwhelming my ears. I needed to hear more than my fear.

Muffled thumps trembled against my belly as the field dropped as one. Nobody was going to risk looking at the mistress. Nobody was going to risk catching their gaze, not when it meant death for whoever did. Surely, surely, we were safe this time?

The steps came closer, stopped. I pressed deeper into the ground as a touch flicked across my palm as lightly as a dead leaf landing on skin. '5129-P,' a soft voice declared, as light as the touch. 'A grade-3 field hand. On spotter duty.'

'Mistress,' I responded as she spoke my name and designation, mumbling into the mud as clearly as possibly.

'Observant, obedient and thrifty. A credit to your crew.'

'Mistress.'

The touch slid away, and the footsteps moved on. Wheels rumbled on the road and hooves clattered on stones. I waited, unmoving, with the rest until I heard the cry from the far side of the field.

'Clear!'

Only then did I scramble back to my feet for the head count. We made it through safely. Nobody lost. This time. I straightened, feeling the sun strike my sweat-dampened shirt, and turned back to my job, ears straining to catch any more approaches. Behind me the teff harvest continued, to the pad of feet and the scrape of straw against cloth, as the sun's warmth dropped slowly down my side, leaving a skim of itchy dried dirt behind it.

Just as the sun shifted to cool shadows, Sev came bouncing up, calling, 'Hey, Fif! We're done - time to head in!' He slung an arm round my shoulders and I slung one around his in return.

'7639-B, one of these days you're going to bounce at the wrong moment and catch a mistress,' I mock scolded him as we headed for our crew's ramp, workers crowding around us.

'Nah, you'd spot them long before there was danger, Fif. You're that good. No worries.'

'Ah, Sev, you give me too much credit. Someone else has to call the clear, I just call the down.'

One of the older women, Ell, clapped me on the small of the back, knocking me out from under Sev's arm. 'I'd rather have the down than the clear any day, less likely me being stoned by a dawdler.'

Heat flooded my cheeks and I shrugged awkwardly, ducking through the entrance into a wall of sour scented air - someone must have recently started a new batch of injera batter. Hand trailing on the stone wall, I edged round the main room and down into the passages that ran from the various barracks to the servant quarters of the mistresses' manor, away from the sounds and smells into peace. I found my favourite niche without trouble and curled up in it, the cool stone and dirt leaching the day's heat from my body as the peace and quiet leached the day's stress from my mind. Except that that was when I first heard the crying.

Fifty-one twenty-nine P is my full designation, but only the mistresses use it, unless someone is trying to make out how lowly I am. Three numbers to sum up a family - my blood-father, my mother and me. One to indicate my workplace. And a letter. P is for proof-child, the living symbol of my mother's fertility, and intended merely as one more step towards her ambition of leaving the fields for the relative safety and luxury of being our crew's brood-mother. I remember the stale-milk smell of the hood I wore over my face and head to keep me safe while she worked, I remember a warm dirt floor that caked dust on crawling hands and toes, and the resulting chalk-gritty taste when I sucked my thumb. Those are the nearest things I have to mother-memories, raised alone instead of in the brood. I turned out flawed, and my mother never achieved her ambition, but I go and sit by her feet sometimes. Her statue stands out by the road, looking up, too caught in her dreams and ambitions to notice the danger signs.

B is for brood-child, born and brought up in a brood group and clearly flawless, because their parents had already proved themselves. I don't begrudge them that, but they are happiest in the crowd. I prefer to unwind in peace. If that makes me the crazy one, the flawed (or more flawed) one, the weird one? So be it. It's who I am. And yet - I dare not step too far from the line. It's bad enough that the mistresses mark me as flawed and unwanted. If they thought I was going beyond that, if they thought I was becoming a threat to them...

I closed my eyes and leaned my cheek against cool stone, trying to regain

the lost peace, but whoever it was continued to weep softly, hopelessly. The sound trickled through the passages like tears down cheeks, insisting on my attention until, with a sigh, I climbed back onto my weary feet and began to hunt the weeper. Hand trailing along the wall beside me, I wound in and out of the passages until finally I found the right one.

'Hey,' I said lightly, leaning against the passage entrance.

The weeping stopped with an abrupt gulp and fingernails scrattled frantically against the floor. ‘My hood's torn...' A husky voice, soft and light, but roughened with crying.

'Hey,' I repeated, my own tension beginning to leak away as I realised she was a human, not a mistress. A mistress wouldn’t need to wear a hood. 'Don’t worry. I’m not a mistress. Not going to hurt you... what happened?'

Cloth scuffed on stone. 'I - Oh never mind. Just go. Leave me alone.’

I edged a pace inside, bare toes exploring the floor as I moved. 'Couldn’t see you even if I was. Place is kept dark.'

A sigh of - relief? A snuffle.

'I won't hurt you,' I repeated firmly. 'Are you new?'

'I - I suppose so.'

My toes brushed cloth. I settled cautiously to the ground, and tucked my feet under me. Put out a tentative hand and brushed skin.

The weeper smacked my hand away with a yelp of pain. 'Don't touch me. Please don't touch me!' And then she was crying again as half-choked sobs forced their way out. 'I've been poked, and prodded, and measured, and scanned all day! I came down here to get away from it. Please - don't you start as well...'

'Sorry.'

She gulped, spluttered, gulped again and blew her nose. '2215-R. Teena. They keep me at the house....'

'5129-P. Fif. Field crew. R?' I'd only met B's and P's so far.

'R is for requisition,' Teena said slowly, warily. 'Means they asked for me, almost before I was born. Picked out for something. I - ' She inched away from me in a scrape of cloth on stone. 'Oh, never mind what. Do you know the way back?'

'I know it. Take my hand. I'll lead you.'

Silence. Tense fingers slowly crawled into mine, roughened like the voice and cold on my skin. I climbed to my feet, free hand on the wall, and tugged very gently.

She resisted, then came, scrambling awkwardly up, taller than I am, and trailed behind as I worked my way through the winding network of tunnels and passages to the door of the house kitchen.

'Here.' I placed her hand on the door.

She hissed back at me. 'Go! Go before it opens. You've no hood!'

'I'm going, I'm going.' I backed off round a corner and stood listening as she first tapped on the door and then was pulled through in a waft of

spices, frying onion, and fish. She was gone, and I went too, back towards my crew and my barracks, and food.

Two days later, she found me in the passages where I had slumped against stone. The mistresses had been in and out all day and the third time I dropped, I landed on something hard. A rock, maybe, or just a lump of hard clay. Whatever it was, my bruised hip now hammered like a second pulse and as I shifted to ease the ache, she said softly, 'Hey?'

'Hey,' I replied, wincing as I shifted again.

'You have your hood today?' she asked, unease clear in her voice.

'Can't see a thing,' I assured her absently. 'So don't worry. Did you get yours mended?'

'Ye-es.'

'Good.'

She sighed, long and sibilant, and slid down the wall in a whisper of rasping cloth. Her foot touched my leg for a moment before she snatched it away.

I sighed too, eased the weight of my bruises, and asked, 'Were you looking for me?'

'I supposed....' She stopped for a moment, shook her head so that the hood batted the wall, and went on grudgingly, 'I supposed I should thank you.'

'What for?'

She gulped. 'For taking me back? I would have been - in trouble - without that.'

'Stone?'

She hesitated. 'Maybe. I don't know. It hasn't ever come up.'

'Forget it then. It's my job to stop people becoming stone.'

She shifted where she sat, and a hiss of pain escaped her, but she said nothing.

'Hurt?' I asked.

Silence for a moment. Then she said hoarsely, 'Cramp, of sorts. They say it is just because I am growing. Nothing that can be done.'

I shrugged and winced as much in sympathy as from my own aches, before changing the subject. 'We can't use hoods in the fields. We have spotters like me instead, to warn when a mistress is coming. We wear them for inspections, or if we're too young or sick to act on the warnings. But that's all.'

A sharp intake of breath and I felt her attention hit me like a punch in the chest. 'How can you tell when a mistress is coming? How? Without becoming stone?'

'I listen,' I told her wearily. 'If you listen hard enough, you can hear the

hair hiss, and they have footsteps like anyone else. You just have to listen for them.'

She made a sound half gasp, half sob. 'I was hoping... Never mind. I suppose I will just have to keep to the hood.'

'You have to wear it?'

'All the time. Unless I'm actually eating, and I eat alone. I never get to see anyone.' The last phrase came out half choked, and I thought of Sev's arm round my shoulders and the scent of fresh-turned earth filling my nose.

My fingers stretched towards her, but I shook my head slightly, remembering her flinch last time and rested my hand on my thigh. 'I suppose there are too many mistresses in the manor for you to tell when one comes close?'

'Yes,' she said, after a moment, her voice trembling, 'yes, that's right. I can't tell.' She scrabbled to her feet. 'Well. Thank you. I must go. I can find my own way.'

Before I could answer she was running, blundering away down the passage. I sighed, shook my head again and rubbed my hands over my bare face, muttering. 'So can I, Teena. So can I.'

It wasn't the last time I met Teena. She picked her way through the passages two or three times a week, learning her way with a swift, grim, determination. Never on any regular schedule, and never coming near the barracks or the crew - at least when I was around - but often enough that I became used to her voice and the way she moved. We'd sit, each against a different wall, not quite within reach, each hooded in darkness, and we'd talk of little things. Of food, of making and mending things, of dreams. Night dreams that is, not daydreams. People like us can't afford to dream of better times and places. Dreams like that shatter like glass when life steps on them, and like glass, they cut deep.

'I dreamt the corn plants held hands and danced,' I told her once. 'A spiral dance into the field centre and out again, all dressed up in leafy finery.'

She laughed in a great gasping gulp of air.

I leaned my head back, and ached to hear the pain threaded in her voice.

She said at last, 'What is it like to stand under the sun and see the corn dancing?'

'Um.' I closed my eyes and rubbed the heel of my hand over them. 'I don't know. I always have my back to the field when I'm spotting, you know? I suppose - it's like friendship wrapping you round. And music. There's a warmth about it, and a joy...'

She whimpered very softly, and I bit off the rest, waiting for the spasm to ease. I could hear her breathing grow harsh and shallow as it hissed through her teeth, and my own hands clenched as I fought down the urge

to help. There was nothing I could do but sit with her, be there for her and listen as she fought her own battle against her pride and her body.

Sometimes we'd spend hours just sitting, letting each other just be, in the quiet of the passages. It wasn't the same kind of peace as being alone, but it was a kind of peace. A way to leach out the strain of spotting, the same as cold stone leached heat from my body.

Or sometimes I'd find a bit of usable clay and bring it down and we'd make models as we talked, fingers dancing and flexing. And then trade them, each for the other. She made me a bird once. I made a coiled snake, head resting on the coils. I think she laughed, but it sounded so much like tears that I couldn't tell. I sun-baked my bird and kept it. She took the snake and left.

The weeks wound on. The lesser harvest finished and the rains came for the main planting. Teff and barley, beans and niger seed, corn and flax, onions and carrots, the work went on as long as there was any light at all. For three days straight I bolted cold injera and beans and crashed into sleep. On the fourth day, I stayed awake long enough to take my meal into the passages and slump in a corner, devouring the silence as hungrily as the food. Before I could close my eyes and seek my dreams, I heard Teena running towards me.

I sighed and gave up on silence. 'Hey. I'm here.'

'Fif?'

'Yes?'

'Don't look for me again. It isn't safe.'

'Why not?'

She hesitated, then said, her voice shaking, 'Oh never mind. My hair is growing, that's all... and the hood won't fit much longer.'

'Hmm?' I shrugged. Hair growing too big for the hood was a common enough problem in the barracks. 'You can't cut it shorter?'

She made a sound part sob, part whimper. 'No.'

'So you get to see me, then?'

'See you? Have you see me?' Her voice skirled up like bird climbing into the dawn. 'No! I - Fif, you're all I have. All I had,' she corrected herself. 'I couldn't bear it to see you stone.'

I shrugged again, and climbed to my feet. 'I can't be turned to stone, silly. You don't need to worry on that front.'

'Fif!'

'Teena,' I told her, exasperation pushing my exhaustion out of the way, 'it isn't like I can see you. And if I can't see you, the stone-making doesn't work. That's why you wear a hood, isn't it? So you can't see? With, without, it's all the same to me. So stop fretting yourself raw and, well,

you know where to find me.' I patted her shoulder lightly and turned away, fingers trailing along the wall as I started towards my own sanctuary.

'Wait!' It was almost a scream behind me. 'Wait!'

I stopped where I was, raising my arm on the wall and leaning my forehead wearily against the crook of my elbow. Teena ran up behind me and clutched my shoulders, spinning me off-balance so that I stumbled against her.

'You mean it?' she asked, breathless with urgency. 'It isn't just that it's dark?'

'Can't see a thing,' I assured her absently, my fingers clutched on her clothes to keep from falling. 'That's why I spot instead of work, and my whole crew knows it. Nobody talks about it, but they know. I thought you did too.'

Luke-warm tears splashed on my hands as she steadied me back onto my feet. 'Fif, I thought you knew too. I thought you—oh, never mind. R is for requisition, true, but also for reject and - and - recruit. Depends if the child takes after the mother or the father.'

I pressed my back against the cold wall, cold fear in my belly. 'Which do you take after?'

'My mother,' Teena said almost inaudibly. 'My mother, the mistress.'

Silence hung between us like a curtain.

At last, Teena gulped. 'I came to say goodbye. They're sending me away, now they're sure which I am. And thank you. I have...' She choked on a sob and backed away. 'I have very much enjoyed your company. I'll remember you.' She turned and ran.

I stood there with my own tears crawling down my face and dripping one by one from the hollow just under my chin. 'So will I,' I whispered finally. 'Oh, Teena, so have I.'

Three years later

'Down!' I cried, and dropped. The thump of my landing scattered itchy dust across my mouth and back, and I heard the other muffled thuds as the rest of the crew followed me down.

Footsteps closed the distance and cool fingers lifted my hand. The lightest of touches flicked across my palm, reading my identity, and I swallowed, but the mistress didn't speak. Something small and hard and round landed in my hand and I closed my fingers instinctively. The mistress dropped my hand and walked away, still unspeaking, but I could feel the curves of a clay snake against my fingers.

I didn't move until the clear sounded.

I didn't leave until Sev clapped his arm round my shoulders and steered

me back towards the barracks entrance.

But once inside, I slipped back into the passages, wading through the dust that clumped under my toes until I came to the old niche.

Someone was already there. I could hear the whisper of breath and the whisper of hair. Then she said softly, 'Hey?'

'Hey,' I replied just as quietly, though I didn't bother to drop and hide. 'You came back?'

She shifted. Maybe she nodded - without the hood to scrape and rustle, I couldn't tell. 'Yes, I'm back. At least for now. They think they have me trained now.'

'And you still manage to get down here?' I snorted. 'Clearly you've your own ideas that they didn't train out of you.' I held out the snake on my open palm. 'I think this is yours.'

Cool fingers brushed my hand as she took the snake back. Light, certainly, but not as light as when she read my name. 'Thank you. I've had it a long time now.'

I smiled wearily. 'Three years and then some? I have a bird too.'

'You kept it?'

'I kept it.'

Silence. Then soft, half-stifled laughter. 'I'm glad.'

'Glad of what?'

She shrugged in a rustle of linen. 'Glad you kept it. Glad to be back. Glad you're still you, Fif. Don't ever - oh, never mind.' Her hands cupped mine now, smooth against the back of my fingers. 'I must go, before anyone misses me and comes looking for me.' Her hair slithered down, brushing cool scales on my palm, and then the lightest of touches flickered across my hand and arm. She brushed them off with a sigh. 'They will lick everything, not just the things I'm supposed to read. Sorry.' She scrambled up as she spoke, and her feet pattered away, paused, and then slowly returned. 'Fif?'

'Yes?'

Half-phrases spilled from her lips. 'If it came to it - If I asked - I would need - I mean, would you?'

I sighed and closed my eyes, leaning my head back against the wall. 'Teena?'

'Sorry,' she muttered, and backed away. 'Never mind. Doesn't matter.'

'Oh stop that,' I snapped, too tired to moderate my tone. 'Sit down and spit it out, whatever it is. How am I supposed to answer if you don't tell me the question?'

She slid down the wall and landed with a thump in the dust. 'It's nothing much,' she protested. 'Just, if I stay, I'm supposed to get a sort of go-between.' She scuffled her feet and I could taste the rising dust.

'And you thought I would do? A flawed field hand? Did you tell anyone this?'

'No, I wanted to ask first. And I couldn't hurt you. That's what gave me the idea.'

I swallowed hard. 'Don't tell them that please. It's - dangerous. For you. For me. For my crew. Some of them, if they can't make me fear for myself? They'll insist on making me fear for others.'

She froze. 'Dangerous? For me also? My hair - now it is grown, it makes me immune to stone. They would do that to me? Make me fear for others, rather than myself?'

'I don't know, but I know they rule us by fear.'

She sighed. 'And must I rule by fear as well?'

'You would rule?'

'I must. For an adult of my mother's kind, there is only the rule, and the fight to rule. And those that lose the fight mostly die. They will share with a child, even with a youngling like I am now, but not an adult.' She swallowed. 'I do not wish to die. Not having come this far.'

'I don't know,' I echoed softly. 'But if you want to fight, give them nothing to use against you.'

The whisper from her hair strengthened to a savage hiss, and she leapt to her feet, raising more dust. 'You're right. Stay safe, Fif.' And then she was gone, running back down the passages towards the manor.

I coughed, spat to remove dust from my mouth, and climbed to my own feet to head back to the barracks. There would be food there, and sleep, and company. There would be everything there, except peace.

Peace would come. I patted the wall beside me in reassurance of that fact. Peace would come, but right now I needed the food and the sleep.

We met irregularly after that, not as often as when we were younger, but often enough to learn each other again. It was quieter between us, wearier, but not as peaceful. I could sense she was dreaming of rule, but she didn't talk of her dreams. I suppose they were too fragile, even for me to hear.

Then I was summoned to the manor. I wore a blindfold that smelt of soap and flowers, not a hood, but it made no difference. I only knew it was Teena receiving me when I heard her voice. She even moved differently in this place, and I missed those familiar steps like an ache in my gut, a twin to the ache of fear that lived there.

The hiss of snakes strengthened as I knelt clumsily and pressed my head to an unfamiliar floor. It was smooth apart from an engraved flower, cool against my skin, and strange. Warmer than stone. Cooler than wood. Smooth, almost slick, without the clinging grittiness of dried clay or dirt.

'5129-P,' she addressed me, and I froze rigid where I knelt, all my attention on her now. 'It is this one's pleasure that you leave the fields to serve within the manor, becoming 5125-P. Do you accept this change of

name?'

'Mistress,' I responded from force of habits drilled into the bone over the years.

'Well,' she demanded. 'Do you?'

'Mistress,' I repeated, wishing desperately that I had been warned beforehand. Though I supposed that she had mentioned it. 'I hear and obey, mistress. I will become 5125-P.' Sev, I thought. I wish I could have said goodbye to him... Field hands almost never mixed with manor hands, and like most of the others, he never came into the tunnels. I wouldn't be welcome in the barracks any more either. I had known that place since I was old enough to walk alone, but now I could go only as a guest.

I closed my eyes behind the blindfold as Teena left, squeezing away tears. Soon after that, brisk steps met me and a soft, pudgy hand closed on my shoulder. A woman's voice huffed in my ear, 'I am 5735-B. Ven. You are the new one? Stand up, they are all gone.'

I eased up until I sat carefully on my heels, but left the blindfold in place. '5129 - No. 5125-P. Fif.' My voice was steady, with no sign of tears in it. 'Yes. I'm new, here.'

'Hmph. Do you want to learn the place with blindfold on or off?'

'On,' I told her with a sigh, though my mouth tasted of fear. A new place. An unknown place. At least when I had moved before, it was to a barracks built on the same pattern as my old one. 'I may have to run errands, and I would rather not get lost, or run risks.'

'Sensible girl,' was her only remark. 'Barefoot helps too. You felt the pattern in the tile? Each room has its own pattern. Come along.' She helped me up and led me off to the kitchen and servants' quarters.

The kitchen door thudded dully shut behind us and I caught the deep breath from Ven as she dropped my hand. Feet slapped on the floor as I stood marooned, afraid to move even with the blindfold hiding my eyes, hiding the fact I couldn’t see. I didn’t know these walls, this place, these people. I dared not risk more lives by revealing how flawed I was.

'Stool on your left,' Ven said tersely. 'There are six of us here. Seven with you. Folk, this is Fif, new, learning her way blindfolded'

I flattened my left hand against the wall and walked my fingers down it, feeling for the stool. I found it at knee height, and folded myself onto it. Familiar cool stone made a comforting wall against my back as strangers moved around me. Long thin fingers turned my hand over and dropped some kolo into it. I whispered, 'Thank you,' and nibbled on the roasted grains as Ven rattled off names and room descriptions. The words spilled over the edges of my memory like flour running through fingers, though I tried to catch it all. Eventually I was left in Long-fingers' charge and allowed to fumble my way around the kitchen under supervision. There was a simple cross-hatching under my feet, which gave way to straight lines in another doorway.

'Our quarters,' Long-fingers explained, steering me with a hand cupped under my elbow. 'Yours is the third door on the right.' He took me to it, and I could smell the tunnels from where I stood, and feel the faintest of draughts on my left cheek. I turned into the draught for a moment, savoured the sense of home, and then swallowed. Home had been the barracks. That home was lost to me now.

'I didn't ask to come here,' I muttered, as an ache grew in my guts.

Long fingers cupped my face. 'Neither did I, in my time. None of us did, but we're here. It's been a long time since we had a new face around though. Learn fast, the mistresses are not tolerant of mistakes.' Then he turned and was gone.

My groping hand hit a weighted curtain, then a door frame. I eased between the two, letting the curtain fall again behind me, and felt my way around the room, only barking my shins and feet two or three times. A low bed filled one side, then a stool against the end wall and a rail along the other wall, with two outfits hanging from it already. I listened for movement for a moment, then paced the room quietly and repeatedly, drilling my body in the shape of it until I could move easily from door to bed and door to stool and bed to rack. Then, and only then, did I feel safe enough to sink down onto the side of the bed, discard the blindfold, and funnel the ache in my guts out through my eyes.

I missed the whisper in my tears, so my first warning was the rattle of the curtain weight. I froze, wet hands over my face, as a soft step closed the distance. Cool, familiar, hands cupped mine, drawing them down enough to lay the discarded blindfold across my palms.

'Come on,' Teena murmured, 'I'll show you the tunnel door, from this side.' She gently wiped the tears from my face, and helped me settle the blindfold into place, before leading me through the curtain and turning into the breeze I had felt before. She let me feel the frame and the handle before she opened it and pulled me through into the familiar taste of tunnel dust.

It was home, and it wasn't, and it tore me in two as the door closed behind us. Teena hesitated for a moment, and then drew me gingerly to her as I wept, holding me like some precious glass thing that might shatter at her touch. Her hair spilled down my back and shoulders, an ever-shifting curtain of whispered sound and flickering touch, as she rested her cheek on my fuzz of hair. 'Oh, Fif, I'm sorry,' she whispered, her roughened voice twining with the snakes' hiss. 'I didn't mean it to be like this....'

I closed my eyes against the pain in her voice, resting my forehead in the hollow just under her collarbone, and said nothing.

'Please, Fif,' she coaxed, 'it will get better. Soon, I swear. The job doesn't involve much yet, and when I take over....' Her voice trailed away and I felt the arms around me tremble.

I pushed away a little and she let me go. We stood on opposite sides of

the passage, letting each other be, and slowly, our breath took on each other's rhythm, so that we breathed as one. I shook my head, and stretched out a hand.

'Soon?'

'Soon,' she confirmed, closing her fingers round mine.

And just like that, we sealed it.

She was right about the job. I spent most of it kneeling blindfolded, head bent, in a corner, while the four mistresses, old and young, talked and hissed and muttered around me. I didn't look up. Didn't even try. Even when Teena sent me to do things or to pass messages, I kept my head down, focusing my mind on the message and the patterns under my bare feet. Flowers, leaves, geometrics. Pretty patterns, each distinct to the touch, and the only certainty of finding my way in this strange place.

And still, when we could manage it, Teena and I slipped back into the tunnels. I could breathe the air here without the fear of the manor, and smell a scent that meant home. It dragged me near to tears every time, but I clung to it anyway. It was the only thing I hadn't yet lost, and someday, yes someday, I would slip away long enough to make my way to the barracks door, to listen, to smell, to remember. Someday. Someday soon.

'How?' I asked in one of these meetings, settled in a nook of tunnel wall. 'How would you take out a m - another mistress?'

'Lasso,' Teena said eagerly, from across the passage. 'Trap her arms and tie her up so she can't move. Don't bother hitting her on the head, too much bulk between snake and skull to do any damage. But you could stab her.'

'I don't carry a knife.'

Teena slapped her side. 'I do. And I can get others. You can have one of mine.'

I slid closer, and held out a hand. 'May I touch it, so I know what it's like?'

'Here,' Teena said, laying a cold, hard, handle across my palm and curling my fingers round it. Her hand lingered around mine as she tapped the blade with a fingernail to make it sing. 'Here is the hilt, and here is the blade. Be careful, it's sharp. Don't cut yourself.'

I nodded, cautiously feeling my way along the blade to take in the shape. The end came sooner than I expected, pricking my finger before I could pull it away. I dropped the knife with a wince and stuck my finger in my

mouth.

Teena sighed, retrieved the knife and put it away with a faint clunk. 'Try not to do that on the day,' she said, but I could still hear the eagerness in her voice.

I turned my head towards the old barracks, just a little, and then nodded. 'I'll try,' I said softly, turning slowly back towards the manor, and climbing to my feet to head back there.

Ven's pudgy hand closed on my wrist as I slid through the door and pulled me firmly inside. 'What are you doing out there?'

'I like it,' I blurted, twisting my head away from her voice.

Her other hand came up and turned my head gently back. 'Ah,' was her only reaction to my eyes. 'Well,' she went on. 'There was another who liked that.'

'What - what happened?'

There was a long pause and then a sigh. 'The mistresses took her. We don't see her any more.'

I flinched and Ven let me go. I fled to the shelter of my room. It wasn't much of a shelter, but at least the curtain weights would give me a few moments of warning.

Months ticked by, without the rhythm of the fields to keep me orientated and I lost track of the time. My hair grew longer, not cut to fit under a hood now, but bushing out above and below the crimp of a blindfold's constant binding. I knew the tiles underfoot and the rooms they filled. There was food, and sleep, and hours of anxious waiting and kneeling, and a slight, endless, ache of grief for lost friends.

Then, one day, warmer than usual, Teena gave me the word I had been waiting for.

'Tomorrow,' she said simply and dismissed me to my own ends.

I stood for a long moment in the corner of her rooms, stretching stiff legs, then padded softly across paired leaves to the door and out onto circles as soon and someday collided inside me.

I woke much earlier than usual, and slipped out of the door, making my way through the tunnels to my old haunts, my old niche from when I was a field worker, memory throbbing with every touch of every familiar wall and every familiar scent. One last time to hold a final memory. To say the farewells that could never, had never, been said. One last time to creep near the barracks door, to listen to the faint hum of lost voices, to smell the mingling of spice and injera, sweat and mud.

The door suddenly whispered open and I darted round the nearest turn in the tunnel behind me and flattened my back against the wall. Voices

boiled out of the open door, hissing like a mistress's snakes, and I dared not move further to safety.

'The tunnels are our best chance of it. We lose enough as it is.'

'Do you know the way? For certain?'

'I know who would.'

'She isn't here. We'll get her too.' Sev's voice, strong with determination. I swallowed down the ache, tears sliding down my cheeks.

Then they spilled out into the tunnels like kolo from a jar, scattering away from the barracks' entrance.

'Fif!' Startled joy in the voice, and I twisted, caught, as a long-familiar arm dropped around my shoulders. 'Hey, don't cry, you'll be safe here. You heard about it then?'

'Heard what?' I ventured.

Sev patted my shoulder. 'The mistresses are fighting among themselves. We're getting everyone under cover until it blows over. Don't worry, you'll be fine.'

It had started already? Early? All I could think of was Teena, and I writhed from Sev's grip. 'I have to get back there.' I told him, taking off down the tunnel, sure-footed with memory. 'I - I have a friend caught in it.'

Sev's fingers snagged at my back, but my shirt tore in his grip and he lost his hold on me. 'We're getting all the humans out, so we can shut ourselves in safely until this is over. Your friend will be fine.'

I dashed a hand across my eyes. 'You won't even find her. You - ' I broke off, shaking my head. I couldn't explain Teena to him. 'You don't know the manor like I do,' I finished lamely, fingers brushing the wall to keep myself orientated. The door was just ahead, and I reached for it, my hand poised to tap.

Sev grabbed my arm, pulling me clear as it opened, and then gave a relieved sigh as people began to file out into the tunnels.

I recognised Ven's step as she came towards me. 'So that's where you are,' she said simply. 'Good. I rounded up the others. Sounds nasty out there.'

I only winced, hanging my head as I waited for the doorway to be clear, my free hand drumming an urgent rhythm against my hip.

Sev pulled at me. 'That's everyone. Come on, before the mistresses catch us.'

'You go,' I told him. 'Just go. I'll find you later'

'Fif....'

He broke off and his hand tightened around my wrist.

Ven shifted her weight, and there was silence for a long moment before she said, 'Let her go, boy. She needs this. Don't you, Fif?'

I nodded, wordlessly yanking at my arm to get free.

Another silence, and then Sev let go so fast that I stumbled, and my shoulder hit the wall as I lurched sideways. I ignored it, pushing off towards the door and sliding quickly through the gap as it closed behind

me. I stood for a moment in the empty kitchen, then padded quietly towards the other door, and the stair to Teena's rooms.

Silence. Not even snakes.

'Teena?' I ventured, and the silence echoed it back to me as loud as my pounding heart. A breeze brought voices in through the window and I ran towards it, the sill smacking me in the gut as I stopped too late. My toes splayed across 4-petalled flowers as I stretched up, straining to hear.

Teena's voice skirled up in defiance, and the other mistress mocked her, laughing. Hand cracked against skin and the mocking went on, even as I shoved myself away from the window and ran for the door and the stairs down. Flowers gave way to circles and then to zigzags. I slowed for the stairs, counting silently as I hurried down, not wanting to fall on a missed step. 'Hang on, Teena, I'm coming,' I urged in a whisper, as if she could sense me.

The voices were loud ahead of me, across diamond patterns, and I felt the hesitation in Teena's speech as I ran forward, hands ahead to catch the outer door. I misjudged the angle, hit wall instead, and tears of frustration welled up. Teena needed me! I felt my way along the wall and finally found the door, just as Teena's voice suddenly cut off.

'Teena!'

My hands ran over the door, hunting for the handle. Then it was there, and I wrenched it open and flung myself through.

'Teena? Are you there? Teena?'

Dying snakes thrashed in the dirt, burying the sound of breaking dreams and hearts. I stopped to breathe, then knelt, crawling the last few feet across dampened earth to her side. My fingers touched a limp hand and I closed mine over it and felt the familiar palm against mine. My other hand slid up her arm, lightly, lightly, like an identity reader, and over the jutting collarbone to the neck.

And halted, trembling, at the torn ruin there.

Striding feet approached and I dropped my forehead into the blood-scented dirt. Someone grabbed a fistful of hair, and wrenched my head up and back. I cried out, unthinking, open eyes brimming with tears.

She cried out too, with a note of fear and threw me down, sprawling half on my side and back. Cool metal slid down my arm as I landed on a bare knife, and my own blood oozed to mix with Teena's in the dirt.

I groped for the knife, trying not to cut myself further, and the mistress's gasp mingled with the hiss of her living snakes when my hand found the hilt. She was afraid of me? But - she was a mistress! She had all the power and I had none. Only flaws.

Flaws that had betrayed Teena, cost her everything.

The mistress grabbed me again, this time by my torn shirt, and pulled at me. I flung my arms up and out for balance - and the knife hit something solid - and we both fell. I hit the ground first, being closest, and she landed

on top of me, unmoving, apart from the thrashing of her dying snakes. Just like Teena's.

I didn't check her like Teena, just pushed her aside before the flood of her liquid could completely cover me. My tears streamed across my face, and I swiped at them with my good arm before I reached out and found Teena's hand again.

'Teena, I'm sorry....' I couldn't finish. 'Sev and the others. They wanted me safe. All of us safe. And now, now they're waiting. And I've never been able to call the clear.'

My cut arm began to throb and I ripped pieces from my shirt to bind the wound. 'I'm going to finish it,' I told Teena, taking one end of a strip in my teeth to tighten the knot. 'I'm going to try anyway. I'm dead whatever happens, but if I can make the clear for the others, they'll be safe.'

I knelt there for a long moment, waiting uselessly for a reply, before I gave up, reached up and gently closed her eyes. 'Sweet dreams, Teena,' I whispered.

Then I took up the knife again in my good hand, and went stalking snakes.

Playing for Time II

'Amazing,' says Tefen. 'That's amazing! We – you did it, Triphis! Out of all those worlds... all those possibilities... you picked one and you made it real.'

They sit cross-legged on the carpet, nude and painted belly and back with sigils, facing each other over the chronomasticon. At first glance it looks like a glass ball, small enough to hold in your palms; but as you look closer you can see shifting, patterns inside, emerald, mandarin orange, aquamarine. The closer you look, the more it seems as though the designs are inside your own eyeballs, being projected backwards inside your head. Your first instinct is to push the patterns away, but relax and let them penetrate, and the device will do most of the work for you.

As the ball's psychedelic lights subside, Tefen hefts off his mask. The thing is made from half of the skull of some twist-horned, three-eyed grass-eater from God knows what planet. It leaves his hair heavy with sweat and it pinches, but Triphis insists it's essential to the work.

He unfolds his stiff legs and pads across the carpet to undo the straps of her mask. She lifts it off as he starts massaging her shoulders. She shrugs him off and stands up, carefully placing her mask on the desk next to a vase of budding cherry branches. She sucks her lower lip into a pout.

That pout shakes Tefen's world. Dark freckles on soft burnt umber watercolour skin, rich clear brown eyes, black hair standing up above her head like the flossy fingers of a star nursery... gleaming white teeth pulling in that pink lip. For a moment he's hopelessly distracted.

'The machine didn't do exactly as you programmed it to, did it?' The chronomasticon sits cradled in the carpet, burbling softly to itself, bubbling with gorgeous colours. Tefen pokes the ball with his toe, watching the missus out of the corner of his eye. 'Was that the reality you wanted?'

'Close... but too unstable. When it comes to power, you have to keep a tight grip, but not so tight that things slip through your fingers.'

'How rude!' She doesn't smile. 'I don't think we can control every detail of the timestreams the thing creates.' The tipping points can

be cosmic or atomic, supernovae or genetic mutations, or anything in between – a busy signal, a random car crash. But a star can't explode before it's ready, most mutations make no difference. Life mostly just goes on. 'I don't think every world is possible.'

'You think too small!'

'Maybe we can only kick the pebble, and then watch how it rolls down the hill.'

'Ugh! I hate metaphors like that. You could at least try to be mathematical about it.'

Tefen glances down at one of the equations she had painted across his abs with a calligraphy brush. It's tricky to make sense of it upside down. He says, 'Well, we've already calculated out some of the constraints on its abilities. There's a pattern to the moments it can change.' In fact, he's fairly sure that pattern can be mathematically described by the vertices of an n-dimensional honeycomb, but that's not the sort of information that's likely to hold Triphis' interest. 'Maybe if we can nail down that pattern, we can control the results more precisely.'

'Perhaps,' says Triphis, idly fiddling with her mask. Hers is made from the face of a dinosaur. Tefen had seen it many times before he noticed the holes on either side of the bony snout, opposite each other in a straight line, and the tiny, deformed metal pellet wedged inside the left hole. It struck him as odd at the time, but he didn't ask.

He says quickly, 'Well, I know how we could test that theory.'

'Yes?'

'Stick a pin in the list without looking,' he says. Now he has her attention. He grins. 'Pick a tipping point of history as randomly as possible. If nothing else, you're bound to see something interesting.'

'Not necessarily,' says Triphis, but at least she's looking at him now, sitting on the edge of her desk with her arms folded.

He grins. 'I'll make you a bet.'

'Cheeky monkey!'

'I bet I can pick one completely arbitrarily and get something worth seeing.'

'Surely most possible worlds are just drab. Or very short-lived.'

'You can't predict what you're going to get until you throw the dice.'

'Oh, all right.' Tefen hops down from her desk. 'I'll take your bet, little angel.'

He knows one reason for the arcane masks, and that's so that nobody can see it when you roll your eyes and pull a face. He knows how easily bored she is, how much she hates not getting her own way, but how can she possibly be getting fed up already?

And how long can he keep her attention?

On the junk moon Abeset, where he had grown up, Tefen had worked the power cables at the edge of the great garbage heap. As a kid he'd figured out how to dig up and cut lengths of cable to sell. Later, a fellow thief and temporary lover had shown him how to add extra lines to the node boxes without killing himself. They sold the free power to the midden-dwellers who could afford it.

When there were no buyers they joined dozens of others sifting the heap for machine components which could be repaired and resold. A clever sifter, one who knew which parts were the most valuable, could earn enough to eat even if they had to keep clear of the shifting gang territories and the packs of medical students.

Every sifter was looking for a single big find. You heard stories - the woman who'd dug up a medical printer, got it working, and now ran a business selling cheap spare body parts; a gang who'd found a misrouted bag of recycling that contained almost a kilogram of neodymium. Tefen's lover had called it the search for the pearl of great price, the thing that would change your life. The billboards told you that qualifications would do that, but everyone knew it wasn't true – you might do a little better, that was all. If you wanted to live like the people on the planet in the sky you had to find that pearl. The trouble was, he said, everybody wanted one and there weren't enough pearls to go around.

If only you were here now, my dear, and not dead of the fumes. You'd tease me that I'm still looking for that pearl.

So what's Triphis looking for, as she travels the galaxy in her will-o'-the-wisp of a spacecraft? What's her pearl? She collects so much stuff, everywhere they go, so many things. But whatever wonders she catches in her grip, she's quickly bored by them. She's always moving on to the next planet or space habitat. Tefen has a pretty good idea what it is, but he doesn't dare ask.

What does Tefen really know about Triphis, after all? Only whispers.

She keeps imprisoned six actual fallen angels, each one tormented for a different crime, some gone quietly mad, some noisily.

She once made herself a lover out of the confessions of virgins, boiling a concoction of their blushing sins and their untouched bodies into the perfect shape of a man, who would have been taller if she hadn't run out of virgins.

She'd etched her initials into one of the Celestial Spheres, and devils and angels alike were still searching for the vandal.

She has an identical twin, and they once traded skins over and over again, until neither of them could remember whether they were wearing the right one.

That the ship had been the prize in a chess tournament, that she had won it in a knife fight, that she had picked it up at a white elephant sale, stolen it from a prophetess in Orion, inadvertently drawn it through the wall of the universe during an extreme short-scale gravity experiment.

Nobody seems to know who the hell Mr Triphis is.

The only thing Tefen is sure of is that she collects books, early human artefacts, fossils, coloured glass bottles, and boys.

Given the amount of objects she owns, Tefen is surprised that her harem is so small, just the three of them. There must be a couple of hundred people in the ship's general crew. Quiver sometimes darkly hinted that there had been other boys, and that their fates had been dark, but he was always saying things like that. Chrys said you couldn't take everything Quiver said seriously.

If she was picky and choosy about her seraglio, then why add him? Surely the galaxy was full of faces like his, or near-misses who could be tailored with a little time in the red tank.

It had to have something to do with the fact that he was the only one of the three that she'd given a mask. Though all three of them had started work as her apprentices – a lot of difficult languages, abstruse chemistry, weird mental exercises – and had her mark on them as proof, only Tefen had completed the gruelling training.

The first time Chrys and Quiver had spoken more than two words to him was the momentous day Triphis first summoned him to her private bubble. He staggered out, an uncertain number of hours later, to the horrifying sight of the rest of the harem and several of the crew, applauding sarcastically.

'I do believe that's a record,' said Chrys.

'Oh my God,' Tefen had croaked out, leaning against the wall. The staff members laughed. The ship's crew were a mostly human grab-bag of snotty lost souls and ex-criminals in ill-fitting uniforms.

Chrys said, 'Come and have a soak in the hot tub.'

'All I want to do is make it to my own bed and die in peace.'

Chrys and Quiver exchanged looks, and then Quiver hefted Tefen over his shoulder in a fireman's lift. 'You'll thank us later,' he said. Tefen didn't have the strength to protest anyway.

A week before making his wager with Triphis, Tefen had gone to the hot tub to look for Chrys, the usual place he checked if he couldn't find the boy anywhere else. It was a little bubble all to itself, fitted out with rejected tiles made for King Darius' palace at Susa and decorated with pots of apple blossoms. It was empty, the citrus-scented water sitting quietly. Tefen sighed, set out a deckchair, and went to fetch something to read.

He was halfway through Karma Cola when Chrys finally appeared, stark naked and bearing some very peculiar marks. He acknowledged Tefen with a grunt and lowered himself into the pool, which started up the bubbles at once, gently, as if it felt sorry for him.

Tefen abandoned his book and his pants and slid into the water. 'You're getting old,' he teased.

Chrys, whose eyes had already half-closed, opened them wide in surprise. 'I can't be that much – wait, aren't you older than I am?'

Tefen laughed. 'Who knows any more?'

'Hmmmmm.' Chrys let his eyes close again. He was taller and more rawly built than Tefen, and his hair was cut shorter, but their faces were similar enough that you could take them for brothers.

When Chrys didn't say anything more, Tefen went on, 'Well, it's an exhausting lifestyle. Sleep, eat, sexual endurance test, hot tub, eat, gym, eat, sleep...'

'Not seeing the problem.'

'Don't you ever get bored?'

'You know what your problem is, new boy?' says Chrys, good-naturedly, shrugging his shoulders as he settles down in the water. 'You don't know a good thing when you've got it. The missus spots your potential, plucks you out of the rubbish heap like a prize from an arcade game, scrubs you up a bit and hey presto! You're at the top of the heap, without having to scramble up through the trash.'

'Is that how she got hold of you, old man?' says Tefen. 'Noodling around on a dump somewhere?'

'None of your beeswax,' says Chrys, equal parts acid and smug.

'The point is, I'm where I want to be. Taking my ease alongside someone we both know for a fact is the most...' - he cast around for moment, searching for adequate words – '... bewitching, magnetic individual alive. Anyway, I thought you had your science project to work on.'

'There are things in Triphis' collection ten times as interesting as my science project. Things she doesn't even know she owns!' Tefen sighs. 'Anyway, my project isn't going very well.'

'No?'

'Bits keep dropping off.'

'You should spend less time worrying about that and more time worrying about your attitude problem. Because you're right, of course.'

'Right about what?'

'One of these days I'm just not going to be able to keep up with her any more.' He grimaces and sinks lower into the soothing water. 'I'm not going to be able to get her attention and keep hold of it. When that happens... well, she'll pick a new favourite. It's in your interest to try and make certain it's you.'

She probably got Chrys the same way she got him, thought Tefen. Like most people in the midden, in between stealing enough to eat, he'd had nothing to do but fill himself full of pills. The cheap ones staved off the hunger and the boredom. Find a few more credits somehow, and you could get the expensive ones, the ones that let you read all night and remember everything you read. Do that enough times and - if your brain didn't pop – you could get real work, maybe even save enough to get out of the garbage heap. He'd been double-timing it at the spaceport as a barista and an interpreter when Triphis had scouted him. 'Darling!' she said, gripping his wrist and insisting on filling him with cocktails during his short sleeping hours. 'Come aboard my ship and work for me. I need someone who's good with tongues.'

After that employment offer, he was surprised when a bored-looking crew member showed him to his room on the astonishing, nameless spacecraft, and more surprised as days went by without anyone making him do anything at all. The crew didn't even need him to translate; they wore AI earpieces, like cheapskate tourists. In between the round of meals and visits to the pool and gym, he got glimpses of Triphis' extraordinary collections, which included a lot more than just books.

It got more interesting when she branded him with her mark and started his training. But even that was over surprisingly quickly. She was pleased that he learned the basics well, but then she seemed to lose interest in him again.

He'd thought he'd work in her floating world for a while, sift through her mountains of trash, try to find something really significant and make his name and his fortune with it. It took him far too long to realise that Triphis simply liked to surround herself with pretty things, and he was one of them.

'There has to be a way out,' Tefen murmured.

'Quiver used to say he knew one,' said Chrys. 'And look what happened to him.'

'So how do I keep her interest?'

'Well... she's incredibly competitive, you must have noticed that. What do you think all the bedroom marathons are all about?'

'Wait a minute,' said Tefen. 'Are those octopus marks?'

'Let us not speak of it.' Chrys grumbled. 'Just keep in mind, Tefen. We make our own heaven and hell.'

Annie's Arms
Xanna Chown

> *So, Annie phones the office at nine o'clock, on the dot, to keep her mother happy. Mrs. Ackman loves boasting to her friends about Annie's job. Around the world unemployment is soaring, businesses failing and economies collapsing. Some people say it's the end of the world.*
>
> *'But Annie and me?' says her mother, savagely. 'We're making money from this.'*

Three months ago:

Annie was at home when the observation started, watching television with her mother in the tiny house they shared on the high street. Something moving by the window caught her eye; she looked up, and there was the shade. At first she thought it was the curtain flapping in the breeze but when she went closer, she could see the stretched grey shadow was human shaped. Annie reached out to touch it but only felt the cold paint of the wall behind. The shade quivered, blinking in and out of being, and Annie recoiled. She snatched her hand away.

'It's not a shadow,' she said.

'It's a trick of the light,' said her mother. 'You could make a cup of tea though, now you're up.'

Annie shrugged and went to the kitchen, thinking it would be gone by the time she came back.

Of course, it wasn't.

'It's not much of a story,' Annie's mother said, sourly, whenever she was asked, 'but it's the truth. And that's in short supply these days.' She was right. As soon as people discovered that their shade wasn't unique – that every single home on the planet had a new occupant fluttering up and down its walls – stories of its first appearance grew bolder and more embellished. Now, when they saw their shade for the first time, they screamed or fainted, dropping plates or hairbrushes or babies. Some swore that the shade surprised them in the bath or on the toilet. Others claimed the arrival was heralded by angelic choirs.

No one understood what was happening.

'It's unprecedented, that's what it is,' Annie's mother said, her gimlet eyes glued to the rolling news, waiting for the announcer to

reveal whether or not Buckingham Palace had one too. When she found out that they did, she couldn't stop laughing. 'We're all in together,' she said. Which, in a way, they were, Annie thought. Although she didn't understand why it made her mother so happy.

As the news reports continued, confirming that every home on the planet was infected, from cave to castle, she stared at their own personal intruder, hanging on the wall.

'What are you?' she whispered. There was no answer, but the shade rippled and somehow, despite the slightness of the movement, Annie could tell that its attention had shifted. It was watching her.

Watching. That was all the shades seemed to do. Annie wasn't sure who had coined the phrase 'the observation', but it soon caught on. It fitted perfectly and had the attraction of sounding scientific, which helped to mitigate the surreal nature of the situation.

'And, after all, we're observing them too,' her mother said, tartly, turning up the volume on the television. Governments around the world had set up teams of scientists and researchers, each racing to be the first to find out something – anything – about this new phenomenon. Theories were made and abandoned with equal speed. The shades were aliens. A government experiment gone wrong. A mass hallucination. A weapon. Apocalypse.

Annie didn't know what to believe, but she trusted the people who appeared on the television, as they promised over and over again that they were doing all they could to sort it out. Sometimes, when she looked at the shade, she thought it looked sad. Perhaps it was only doing its job, she thought. Perhaps it didn't even know all the trouble it had caused.

Annie stands by the front door with the phone pressed close to her ear. The television in the living room is turned up loud and it's hard to hear the voice on the other end of the line.

'Good morning, Surrey Shade Sitters. Lucinda speaking.'

'Hi, Lucinda. It's only Annie.'

'Oh, Annie, hi. I'm glad you phoned. We're busy as bees at the moment.'

Eight weeks ago:

Annie's interview with the shade-sitting agency was her mother's idea. Mrs. Ackman had got it from a late-night programme on Channel 4.

Annie hadn't had a job for years and was intensely nervous. She'd left school at sixteen to look after her mother, managing to fit in some part-time cleaning work to start off with, but eventually giving in to the inevitable and registering as her mother's full time carer.

As she sat in the airless office block, trying to avoid making eye contact with the other candidates, she went over her mantra in her head. The three S's. *Smile, speak slowly, stay calm*.

'Annabel Ackman?'

Annie followed the interviewer out of the room and down the corridor, to a small, freshly-painted office. The interviewer smiled at her, reaching out to shake hands.

'I'm Lucinda,' she said. 'I own this company.'

Annie managed a smile. 'That's great,' she said.

'Thank you,' Lucinda said. 'My *personal* philosophy has always been that if you see a gap in the market, you should just go for it, you know? We've been open for two weeks now and, if anything, we *under* estimated the demand. That's why we're looking to take on more staff.' She beamed at Annie. 'So, Annabel. What is it about shade sitting that appeals to you?'

The lack of qualifications necessary, Annie thought, then gave herself a shake. That was her mother's voice in her head.

'Well,' she said, hesitantly. 'It might sound strange, but I quite like them. The shades I mean.'

'You have a shade at home?'

The question was meaningless. Everyone had a shade at home. That was the problem.

'Yes. My mother's with it today. It's a good one, I think. It doesn't follow you about much. It's like watching television.'

Lucinda nodded. 'Yes, mine's like that.' She looked down at the crumpled paper on the desk in front of her. Annie's job application.

'You live with your mother?' 'Yes. I'd just moved back in with her when the shades came, which was lucky, really, because it means we only have one shade between us.'

It was a lie, Annie thought. But only a small one. She wasn't about to tell this woman in her pencil skirt and white blouse that she had never moved out of her mother's house.

'Who looks after your shade?' Annie asked.

Lucinda looked surprised. 'My husband works from home, and we have an au-pair for the kids who lives in,' she said. 'If we go out in

the evening now, we use one of the agency staff, of course. Are you happy to do evening work, or was it only daytimes you were looking for?'

'Evenings are fine,' mumbled Annie. She didn't go out in the evenings much. Nor did her mother. Which was – as her mother said sharply when Annie protested about attending the interview – a *waste of resources*. Only one person had to be in the house to keep the shade happy, after all. What was the point of Annie watching television with her at home, when they could watch it in separate houses and actually make some money? The carer's allowance was a pittance, and her pension and disability allowance only went so far.

'There's a training workshop running next week,' said Lucinda. 'It covers the basics – what to do in an emergency, how to tell what sort of shade you're dealing with, that sort of thing. Interested?'

'Yes.'

'Good,' said Lucinda. 'You'll get a certificate to say you've passed the course, then we can get you out there working straight away.'

Annie smiled weakly and stood up to shake Lucinda's hand. The interview was over and it looked like she had got the job.

'It will cost you £150 to attend the workshop,' said Lucinda, handing over a booklet. 'All the information you need is in here.'

'There's something I need to talk to you about,' Lucinda says. 'Mr. Maxwell called up yesterday about his shade. Says it's shrunk?'

'Shrunk?'

'Since you sat for him a couple of days ago, it's got really small and doesn't move about any more. It's just… stuck, he said. To the kitchen wall? Did you notice anything strange about it when you were there?'

'No,' says Annie. 'It was just a normal shade. The usual size. Moving around and everything.'

'Ah. Well, I don't know what to say. Do you have any idea what's going on with it?'

'No,' says Annie.

'Shame,' says Lucinda. 'I thought you were the first person in the world to work out how to kill one.' She pauses and Annie feels panic rising in her chest. 'We wouldn't know whether to thank you for getting rid of them or fire you for ruining business,' she says and laughs loudly. Annie tries to join in.

'Right then, down to business,' says Lucinda. 'Jobs for today. There's one in Kingsland Road at two thirty for the full afternoon, if you want it? Mrs. Gagola wants to go shopping again.'

'No,' Annie says. 'No, I'm sorry, Lucinda. I'm… er… I'm not feeling

very well. I can't do any sitting today. I'm sorry.'

Seven weeks ago:

Annie rather enjoyed the workshop. There was no need to take notes, everything Lucinda said made sense, and Annie didn't have to stand up in front of the group and do anything. That was what she had been dreading the most. She didn't even need to talk to anyone during the lunch break, as one girl, Lizzie, held court with lurid stories of the day her neighbour's shade had started screaming.

Annie's shade never screamed. There was always someone in the house for it to watch, either her or her mother, and that was all it needed. Some people's shades were more difficult, wanting more entertainment than that, but most only required a constant presence in the house in order to stay silent.

Anyone who had heard a shade scream once would do anything to stop it happening again. It started with a panicked shriek, followed by a wail of pure misery, and a final sustained scream loud enough to make the neighbours in the surrounding roads retch. Even the deaf were not exempt. It was impossible to ignore, driving people from their seats and out into the streets to hunt down the person responsible and force them back by any means necessary.

'Do not leave your shade unattended at any time!' blasted government warnings from hastily put-together infomercials and posters. 'If your shade starts to scream, return to your house immediately. If your shade continues to scream when you are back in the house, dial triple-7 for the 24-hour emergency helpline.'

The helpline numbers had been set up in an attempt to stop the suicides. There had been a rash of them at the start of the observation, as people left their homes to escape the shades, panicking and confused, jumping from bridges or throwing themselves under trains. Death made the screaming stop.

'If your shade starts screaming, the *last* thing you should do is panic,' said the lady in the comfortable sweater on the breakfast show. 'Simply return to your house. If your shade has started screaming, it needs you. No one else will do. If you have to leave your house unattended for a short while, ask a friend or neighbour to sit in your house for you. But remember, once the shade starts screaming, it has to be *you* that returns. No one else entering the house will be able to make it stop.'

After the workshop, some of the girls went out for a drink to celebrate their new qualification, but Annie went home instead. Her mother was watching the news in her usual chair, the shade on the wall behind her partially overlapping the framed reproduction of the Hay Wain. It was less human shaped today, its fuzzy arms and legs folded in on itself as it concentrated on the screen.

Annie glanced at the television, which showed a reporter standing on the banks of a swollen river. He was shouting over the noise of the torrential water to make himself heard.

'Hundreds dead,' said Annie's mother, without turning her head. 'The military wouldn't let them leave their houses, so they stayed put while the river burst its banks.'

'Where?' asked Annie.

'Oh, I don't know. Somewhere in Africa.'

Annie winced. 'I did the workshop,' she said finally.

'Good,' said her mother. 'While you're up, you could put the kettle on.'

Annie nodded and moved towards the kitchen. At the door, she paused and looked back at the scene of devastation on the screen. She would have liked to visit Africa, she thought. Before all this started. It was pointless to think about it now, of course. The borders were closed for good, everywhere. All around the world there were people stranded, separated from their families, knowing they would never see them again. She glanced at the shade hanging on the wall.

'That's your fault, you know,' she said.

The shade didn't move.

Annie puts the phone down and goes into the living room to see her mother.

'There's no work for me today,' she lies, 'so maybe I could stay in and you could go out for a change. I thought you could go to a matinee at the cinema.'

Annie's mother stares at her suspiciously. 'No work?' she says. 'Have you done something to upset the boss?'

Annie shakes her head vigorously, knowing she looks guilty as hell. Her mother can always see through her.

'I don't want to know, Annabel,' her mother says with a laboured sigh. 'I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Bring me the phone, I'll see if Carol wants to come with me.'

Six weeks ago:

Annie's first assignment with the agency was at a large house near the park.

'Try not to do anything stupid,' Annie's mother said, as she left. 'Remember, all you have to do is sit there and do nothing. Just like being at home,' she added, spitefully.

As she shut the front door behind her, Annie had a sudden urge to run. She stopped herself quickly. People were suspicious of that sort of thing. Newly-formed vigilante groups roamed the streets on the lookout for runners, ready to return them to the houses – or worse – if they were trying to escape. She allowed herself a guilty smile as she imagined what she would say if she was stopped. 'I wasn't running from a shade, I promise. It's my mother that's the problem.'

The buses were running a vastly reduced service these days, but Annie got lucky and reached the bus stop as the 137 came into view. She surprised herself by grinning as she walked up the stairs to the top deck. She was feeling more positive than she had done in a long while.

Maybe this is all it takes, she thought to herself. Simply leaving the house and having a place to go. This is what empowerment feels like! – the magazines she read talked a lot about empowerment – I mean, okay, so I'm still living with Mother and there's no boyfriend on the horizon, but the staff at the agency go out for drinks every month. I could go, meet some people. Meet some boys. Maybe meet *The One*…

Annie had been a firm believer in the existence of The One for most of her life. Over recent years, her faith had begun to waver, but now, with the heady possibility of monthly drinks, it was back with a vengeance. All around the world, the shades were closing down people's options but – against all odds – Annie felt like hers were starting to open up.

Annie got off the bus and a man with a beard shoved a flyer into her hand. *The world is ending!* it nagged. *Don't keep calm. Don't carry on.* She dropped the flyer in a bin and carried on walking. The world wasn't ending, it was restructuring – that's what the people on the television said. Around the world, totalitarianism was on the rise. Population was falling dramatically and would continue to do so, according to the experts, but that wasn't such a bad thing, surely?

In her mind's eye, Annie saw the riots that exploded on her

mother's television set every night. The earthquake zones that had to stay inhabited at all costs. The collapsing shantytowns crammed with screaming shades. The crowded hospitals. The police with tear gas and guns. Then she looked around her at the leafy, suburban avenue. Not here, she thought. We're safe here. We're always safe here.

She rang the doorbell of number 26 and Mr. Simcox opened it, dressed in a suit and tie. 'You must be from the agency,' he said. 'Come in, come in.'

The hallway was large and covered in soft carpet. The pictures on the walls were abstract, pastel shapes in dark wooden frames.

'The shade's in here,' the man said, jovially. 'We call it Cliff. As in Richard? And the Shadows?'

'Cliff,' said Annie, smiling dutifully.

'It's usually in here,' the man said, ushering Annie into the living room and gesturing at the pale cream sofa. 'It's one of the better ones, I think. Not a screamer at any rate. Not that we've ever tested it out,' he added, quickly.

'That's good,' Annie said, sitting down. 'Can you leave your number, so I can contact you in an emergency?'

As the man jotted down his number and the address of the party he was going to, the shade flickered into the room. It slid round the doorframe and across the ceiling, slowly moving to a position over the fireplace.

'Hello there, Cliff,' said Mr. Simcox, his voice full of fake joviality. He put on his coat and made for the door. 'I'll be back in about four hours,' he said, a flash of concern passing over his face. 'You won't… leave? If I'm late?'

'Surrey Shade Sitters never leave a house unattended,' Annie said, with the reassuring smile she had learned in the workshop. 'Don't worry, Mr. Simcox. Any extra time you take will be added onto your bill by the office.'

Mr. Simcox left, and Annie was alone with the shade. She got out a magazine and started to read.

Mrs. Ackman is waiting by the door when the taxi arrives, leaning heavily on her walking sticks. Annie waves as the driver helps her mother into the waiting car, then she shuts the door, takes a deep breath and walks into the kitchen. The shade is in its usual place on the wall.

'She's gone,' Annie says. 'We can do it now.'

Two weeks ago:

It didn't take long for Annie to settle into her new working life. Every morning she phoned the office at nine to find out about the day's jobs, then picked the ones that fitted in with her mother's routine. The work was steady, which made up for the fairly basic rate of pay, and she even had a couple of regulars. There was something strangely comforting about sitting in other people's houses. She enjoyed the quiet of a home with no people in it. The shades never bothered her, happy to watch her as she moved from room to room, taking a nap on a stranger's bed, eating a stranger's food, reading a stranger's books. She never turned the television on. She preferred it that way.

'You're lucky to have me, you know,' Annie's mother said, when Annie brought home her first pay packet. She had already told Annie that they would use the money to buy a new television. Then, there was a sofa she had her eye on. She also had a plan to stockpile food in the basement, just in case it was needed. 'This money belongs to both of us,' she said, jabbing her finger at Annie. 'It's only because I'm stuck here that *you* can go out to work, and carry on with your life.'

Annie nodded her head in mute agreement. All around them, people were struggling to adapt their living arrangements in a way that would let them keep up a normal life as best they could. Elderly relatives, long abandoned in care homes, suddenly found themselves being argued over, or snatched away in the night, by their relatives. The shades were happy enough to stay at home with an eighty or ninety year old, it made no difference to them. Why pay for your great aunt to be looked after by someone else when you could have her in your house and regain your freedom?

'Abuse of the elderly in these situations is rife,' warned the rolling news.

'Finally, old people like me are being valued,' Annie's mother said viciously. She took Annie's pay packet and stashed it in her cardigan pocket, flicking through the channels until she came to one with a heavily made-up woman sitting on a sofa with several celebrity guests.

'So the question I have to ask is this,' said the presenter feverishly, her blonde fringe bobbing up and down as she spoke. 'Is the observation actually creating a Utopia? Delinquent kids are off the

streets, family ties are being strengthened, and communities are being forced to pull together to survive...'

'Now *that's* an original thought,' said Annie's mother.

'I don't know,' said Annie. 'Shouldn't people… you know… be allowed to go out if they want to?'

'People like you, you mean?' asked her mother, slyly. 'This is new. What's going on? Got a boyfriend?'

Annie shook her head. Annie had never had a boyfriend, although there had been more than a few men she'd loved from afar. Closer up, there had been some ungratifying and clumsy alcohol-fuelled encounters at parties, but she tried not to dwell on them. They were too far removed from what she wanted, or hoped for, when she thought about love. She wanted something more. Something *pure*. When she'd gone for drinks with the agency staff last week, the other girls had been falling over themselves to moan about their boyfriends and husbands, describing a multitude of sins that Annie couldn't even begin to imagine. She wouldn't mind sharing a house with someone who left his clothes on the floor, she thought. Not if he loved me. Not if he was The One. She wouldn't mind putting the toilet seat down. She wouldn't *mind*.

'You can't leave me now,' Annie's mother said, interrupting her thoughts. 'It's against the law.'

'I'm not going to,' Annie said, stung. 'Anyway, it's not. Not yet.'

It might be soon though, she thought. The country was in crisis, everyone said so. Who knew how many emergency laws were being pushed through, right at this moment? There were so many new situations to deal with. Some ministers wanted to introduce fines for people who tricked others into shade-sitting long hours for free. Others were pushing for tough prison sentences for people found guilty of harbouring someone they knew to be absconding from their shade.

'Say what you will, the homeless situation is improving,' Annie's mother said. It was her favourite joke. The housing market had reeled, stuttered and was now in the final stages of collapse. No high street was complete without at least one boarded-up estate agents. At first, houses that had been uninhabited at the start of the observation – and were therefore free of shades – had sold for a premium, only to cause rage and despair when a new shade popped up as soon as the buyer moved in. Initiatives to move homeless people from the streets into empty houses had been met with anger,

as had a scheme to offer the services of street-sleepers as free shade-sitters. Setting fire to your house, or demolishing it completely was no good. If anything was going to make a shade scream it was that, and then where did you have to run back to? Your neighbours would do anything to make the noise stop. And if that meant killing you, well… it happened, people said darkly. It just wasn't often reported.

Annie's mother shifted around in her chair, and turned her attention to the television. 'Do you fancy putting the kettle on, Annie?' she asked. 'I'm parched.'

At the sound of Annie's voice, the shade slithers rapidly down the wall, over the floorboards and onto the sofa beside her. It is almost touching her now, shivering as it laps up against her right arm.

Annie shivers too, in anticipation.

Three days ago:

Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell lived in one of the larger houses on the other side of town. It was about a forty minute bus ride away and Annie had not been there before, but her mother was pleased with the extra money the overnight booking would bring.

'Thank you for coming at such short notice,' said Mrs. Maxwell, shaking Annie's hand. 'I hope it's not too much bother. We'll be back early tomorrow morning.'

'One thing you need to know,' added Mr. Maxwell. 'Our shade is a little bit *special*. You'll need to talk to him.'

Annie nodded.

'He likes it when you tell him what you're doing, if you see what I mean?' said Mrs. Maxwell. 'So, if you're making a sandwich, you have to explain it as you go. Like, "I'm getting out the bread now" or "I'm going to put some cheese on it." He likes that.'

'He?' asked Annie.

'He seems like a he,' said Mr. Maxwell. 'That's all.'

Annie smiled to herself. The more clients she saw, the more she noticed the compulsion people had to humanise their new companions. A coping strategy, Lucinda had called it, in one of her obligatory mini-workshops (£60 for half a day with complimentary coffee and biscuits) although it seemed to Annie more like people were engaged in a kind of social one-upmanship. *Well of course we talk to our shade. Don't you?* struck the right note. As did: *My goodness, he's practically part of the family!* and: *Really, we're terribly*

lucky to have a shade like ours.

Annie watched the Maxwells leave, then went to introduce herself to the shade. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'If they want me to talk to you, that's what I'll do.' She regarded the shade thoughtfully. It was long and thin. 'I'm going to make a cup of tea,' she said. 'You've probably seen something like this before.' There was already water in the kettle so she clicked the switch. 'That was me turning the kettle on,' she said. 'Now you can hear the water boiling inside.'

The shade fluttered down the wall to watch. It was definitely one of the more attentive ones she'd met, Annie thought. Shades didn't usually get this close.

'It's boiled,' Annie said. 'So I'm going to pour the water into this mug.'

The shade was next to Annie's arm as she picked up the kettle, so close that they were almost touching.

'Ow!' The Maxwells' telephone rang and Annie jumped at the sudden noise. Boiling water from the kettle splashed up her right arm, making her cry out. Raising the burnt patch to her mouth, she slammed the kettle down on the counter. Then she turned on the cold tap and ran her burning skin under the steady stream of water.

That was stupid, she chided herself. Idiot. No more hot drinks for you, tonight. She rinsed a tea towel in cold water and wrapped it around her arm. Then, she took her magazine up to the Maxwells' spare bedroom and tried to settle down for the night. The shade didn't follow her, which was a relief. Her arm hurt, and she really wasn't in the mood to tell it how she was cleaning her teeth or using the loo.

She didn't see it in the morning either, when the Maxwells came back. Probably still skulking about the kitchen, she thought. Perhaps she'd scared it.

> *Annie walks up the stairs to the bathroom and turns on the tap, the shade flickering anxiously behind her. She scans the bottles of bath oil and shampoo on the glass shelf. Bubbles would be nice, she thinks. Romantic, even. She pours a few drops of her mother's strawberry bath milk into the hot water.*

Two days ago:

From the moment she returned home from the Maxwells' house, Annie's shade started acting oddly.

It came out of the living room at the sound of her key in the door

then halted, extended across the hall ceiling.

Annie ignored it and headed straight for the kitchen to make her mother a cup of tea, as she always did when she'd been away on a job. The shade followed, moving faster than usual as it slipped along the walls and clung to the kitchen ceiling above her.

'What's up with you?' asked Annie. She popped open a packet of painkillers and swallowed two tablets with a glass of water. Her arm was really smarting. The shade slid down the wall, arranging itself on the work surface so that it was as close to Annie as it could be without actually touching her.

'Stop it,' said Annie in surprise. 'What are you doing?'

'Annie? Are you home?' called her mother from the living room. 'Have you put the kettle on?'

Annie made the tea and took it through to her mother. The shade followed her, eagerly flitting over the walls to the living room.

'When did the shade start acting so weird?' she asked.

'How am I supposed to know what's normal for one of those things?' replied her mother sourly.

'Sorry. I mean… it's usually quite slow, isn't it?' Annie frowned. 'It seems to be zipping all over the place now. Look.'

Annie's mother looked at the shade, which was hunched on the wall behind Annie. She shrugged and turned back to the television where two earnest men in suits were engaged in a heated debate about the threat of nuclear attack. In the early days of the observation, some countries' fingers had been dangerously close to the big red button.

'*He's* saying that the observation means an end to warfare as we know it,' her mother explained, pointing a bony finger at the man on the right. 'No one can spare enough people to actually invade another country.'

'Well that's good,' said Annie.

'You may well say that,' her mother retorted. 'But this one –' she jabbed her finger at the other man, '*he* says it only takes one person to launch a missile.'

Annie winced. 'I hurt my arm,' she said. She showed her mother the burn.

'You should put some cream on that,' her mother said.

'Okay.' Annie left the room and made her way upstairs. To her surprise, the shade came with her, sliding up the banister beside her. It usually preferred the company of her mother and the

constant stream of television chatter in the living room.

For a moment, Annie wondered if she should call the triple-7 helpline. Too melodramatic, she decided. Instead, she picked up her phone and started to type.

> *My shade is…* she began. The search engine immediately presented her with a drop-down list of common search terms.

… screaming

… a screamer

… going to scream

Not yet, she thought. She deleted the words and tried again.

> My shade won't leave me alone.

No, that wasn't quite right.

> Is my shade trying to tell me something?

There were fewer results this time. Annie scanned down the list until one caught her eye.

www.shade-talkers.com … Connect with your shade in three easy steps!

Annie clicked on the link, then bookmarked the page for later. Perhaps the shade would be back to normal in the morning.

> *Annie pulls her towel off the rack and hangs it over the chair by the bath, ready for when she gets out. She takes off her clothes slowly. Getting undressed in front of the shade seems strange, although she's done it before. She gets into the water, and sits down. The hot water laps over her thighs.*
>
> *'So, are you going to come in?' she asks.*

One day ago:

The next morning, when Annie woke up, the shade was hanging over the edge of her bed like a thinly stretched spider. As she opened her eyes, it slipped guiltily across the covers, over the bedside table and up the wall. Annie frowned and reached for her dressing gown. It has obviously been crouched beside her arm all night.

The sound of the downstairs television told her that her mother was up, but there was no need to lock the door. Her mother never moved far from the living room.

'Right then,' Annie said, with a forced laugh. 'You're still being weird?' She sat down on the bed and picked up her phone, scrolling through to the website she'd found the night before. Silently, the shade slid to the floor, positioning itself at her feet. Annie felt her

stomach churn, as she suddenly wondered if what she was doing was illegal. Surely not. The site hadn't said that it was dangerous to attempt to contact a shade.

'Nothing ventured, eh?' Annie muttered, clearing her throat. 'Step one,' she read. 'Find a quiet place where you feel comfortable and won't be disturbed.' She thought for a moment, then tucked her legs up under her, which was arguably more comfy. 'Step two. Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a white, open space.' Annie shut her eyes tightly and tried to make her mind go blank. 'Step three,' she said. 'Say the following words.' Annie opened an eye to check the words, then shut it again. 'I am waiting for you in a white, open space,' she said slowly. 'Shall we talk?'

She waited.

All shades communicate differently, the website suggested helpfully. A tingling in your body, or even a sudden urge to scratch your nose, could be your shade's way of letting you know it is there.

Annie's legs were certainly tingling, but only because they were going to sleep. This is ridiculous, she thought, crossly. She shifted position, opened her eyes and screamed.

'Get off. Get off!' Annie jumped to her feet and brushed frantically at her right arm. The shade, which had been wrapped around it, slipped back onto the floor. Annie was shaking from the contact. Shades weren't supposed to touch, she thought, reaching for her phone. They were supposed to watch. She was going to have to call the helpline after all.

Annie.

The voice was a picture in her head.

Annie's.

The shade was talking to her.

Annie's arm.

She was going mad.

'Hello?' she said at last, staring at the shadow on the floor. At once, pictures rushed into Annie's head. She saw herself at the Maxwells' house and the boiling water sizzling on her arm. She saw the Maxwells' shade, then her shade, then the two of them together, then there were only colours, flashing in sequence with the same two words repeating over and over again.

Annie's arm.

Annie's arm.

Annie's arm.

Annie sat down heavily on the bed. She could still see the colours blinking and on and off in her head, combining with the images until they started to make a sort of sense.

'The Maxwells' shade… is in my arm?' she said, hesitantly.

Her mind lit up with a bright yellow yes.

'Is this a joke?' She stared at the soft, pinky flesh of her right arm.

Her mind flooded with a dark, blue no.

'I don't understand,' she said. 'How did it happen?'

The pictures came again, more insistently this time – Annie's shade, the Maxwells' shade, the boiling water.

'You…' Annie paused. 'You can talk to me because you're friends with the Maxwells' shade?'

Yellow.

'And the Maxwells' shade is in my arm, because of… something to do with boiling water.'

Yellow.

'Because it was touching me at the same time as the water?'

Yellow.

'So, is that bad?'

Another stream of pictures that Annie couldn't quite make out. Images of things that she had never seen, that were in no way a part of her world. She suddenly realized that this was quite different from the connection the website had been suggesting she make. This wasn't a pleasant tingling. It wasn't even a conversation. It was as if the shade's mind was bleeding slowly into hers.

'Stop it,' said Annie and the pictures stopped, the final image of a burning star frozen for a second in her head before it vanished. 'Okay, so you come from the stars,' she said. 'What are you doing here then? No one knows what's going on. You've seen the television. It's all such a *mess*.'

Yellow. Purple.

'Are you apologizing or laughing?' asked Annie.

Purple.

'Oh god,' she said, picking up her phone in frustration. And then 'Oh *god*,' as she saw the time. 'I have to go to work.'

Dark blue. Purple. Red. Pink.

'We need the money.'

Agonised purple. Pink. Red. Purple.

'Don't you dare scream,' Annie said, suddenly filled with horror at the thought. 'Don't you dare! I'm working a full day today, and an

overnight too, but I'll be back tomorrow, I promise. I'll talk to you again tomorrow? But not if you scream. Don't scream. Okay?'

Yellow.

'Okay.'

The water is hot, and it gives her goosebumps. She lowers herself down until her whole body is submerged. Her arm fizzles as soon as it hits the water, tiny shocks racing from her fingertips to her shoulder then back again. The Maxwells' shade is getting excited.

Annie's shade flutters up the tiled wall beside her, hesitates for a moment, then slips like quicksilver, plunging down into the bathtub.

It hits the hot water and a thousand lightbulbs explode behind Annie's eyes. She blinks, staring around the room to see if the shade is still there. It isn't – of course it isn't – it is inside her, slipping around her left arm, pulsing in time with the movements in her right.

'What happens now?' Annie says, out loud, but the colours and images in her head are gone. 'I don't know what to do,' she whispers.

The fluttering in her arms becomes more urgent as the shades beat insistently up and down, up and down.

Today :

Annie got home from the overnight at about eight a.m. She was feeling tired and more than a little woozy as she sneaked quietly up the stairs, avoiding her mother and the kitchen kettle. She didn't usually mind doing overnights, but this time it had been hard to get any rest. Her brain had refused to relax, choosing instead to replay the shade's images in an attempt to make sense of them. Now, after a night of fitful sleep and strange dreams she was beginning to think she had worked it out. Something in the moods, colours and repetitions created something that resembled a story, although it was more like a jigsaw with pieces missing.

The shades lived in a star, or near a star, Annie thought. And they were very, very old. They – all of them – were being punished for something. She wasn't sure what, but it seemed as if the punishment involved being trapped here, on Earth, watching. The closest thing she could find to compare it to was community service, although she could tell the analogy was far from perfect. Besides, it raised so many questions. What had they done? Who was punishing them? What else was *out* there?

There was another puzzle that needed teasing out as well, a second story interlaced with the first, but harder to follow, existing only in the subtle gradations of the pinks and reds that the shade had

shown her. This was a secret story of love and loss that belonged to her shade only. It was exquisite, infinite, intense; unbearably sweet and unbearably sad at the same time.

What confused Annie most was that none of this scared her. In fact, if anything, it all made more sense than everything else she had ever experienced. The shade's story was the closest thing to perfection that she had ever known. It was almost as if her life had been on hold until now. This was what she had been waiting for.

Annie lay down on her bed and shut her eyes. At once, a rainbow of colours shot through her mind.

Yellow. Pink. Red. Annie's arm. Annie's arm.

'Whoah,' Annie said. 'Wait. I didn't invite you in this time.'

Green.

'No,' Annie said slowly. 'I didn't tell anyone.'

Yellow.

'Okay,' said Annie. 'Can we maybe talk later? I've got so many questions, but I feel a bit… I don't know. I'm so tired.'

Blue. Green. Yellow.

'You've got something to tell me?'

Yellow.

'Ha,' Annie allowed herself a tired smile. 'I'm getting better at this. Maybe I can start my own website on how to chat to shades.'

Dark Blue. Alarm.

'I was joking,' Annie said. 'I'm tired. What do you want to tell me?'

Colours bloomed behind Annie's eyes again. The Maxwells' house. Annie's house. The Maxwells' shade.

Annie's arm. Annie's arm. Annie's arm.

'Oh my god,' Annie suddenly feeling more awake. 'You're in *love* with the Maxwells' shade?'

Yellow.

'That's why you've been following me about?'

Yellow. Pink. Red. A mad jumble of images. Clocks on the wall, a strange grid of grey blocks, her shade growing and blossoming outwards as it joined with another one. Stars shooting. Planets spinning. Separation. An ecstasy of suffering. Silence.

'Yes,' Annie said slowly. 'I get it. You were together for so long, and you've missed each other so much.'

Pink. Violet. White.

'And through some random chance of fate you've been imprisoned –' she stopped. Would it mind her using that word? '– in the same

city.'

Yellow.

'But you didn't know till the boiling water thing happened, and now alien Romeo and Juliet is happening in my arm?' Annie laughed suddenly and once she started laughing, she couldn't stop, gulping and choking, almost crying. It's too much, she thought.

She stood up, and took a big, shaky breath. Her shade had met The One to end all Ones and then lost him. Romeo and Juliet didn't even come close to this love affair. Here were two creatures, whatever they were, burning for each other across space and time, who they had found each other again, against the odds, in her suburban semi-detached house on her tiny planet.

Annie looked down at her arm and felt a surge of pride. She *was* a part of this love story, she thought. This strange, beautiful, once-in-a-lifetime love story. A walk-on part in the biggest love story she's ever heard.

'Well,' she said. 'What do you want me to do?'

Yellow. Pink. A running tap. A kettle. Steam. Heat.

'I'm not pouring boiling water on my arm again. That hurt.'

Dark blue. Grey.

'It hurt!'

Dark blue. Purple. Green. Annie's bathroom.

'You're kidding me,' Annie said finally. 'You want me to take a bath?'

Yellow. Yellow. Orange.

'A very hot bath?'

'Annie!' Her mother's shrill voice rang up the stairs. 'Who are you talking to?'

In an instant the shade was gone from Annie's head and her thoughts were her own again. The shade scuttled up the wall, taking Annie's burgeoning confidence with it.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I need to talk to someone first, get some advice. I should phone the helpline.'

The shade shook violently.

'There's something I don't understand,' Annie said. 'How can I have the Maxwells' shade in my arm? Surely they would have phoned the agency to tell them it was missing?'

'*Annie*!' screeched her mother. 'I know you're back. It's nine o'clock, on the dot, and you haven't phoned in to the office yet. You don't want the other girls to get all the best jobs.'

‘Coming,’ Annie called. She headed out of the room and downstairs to the phone, the shade at her heels like a lost puppy.

Annie puts her head under the water. She can hear her own heartbeat through the rush and swoosh of the water. She surfaces and the tiny, frantic beats in her arms speed up. Will they meet in the middle of me? Annie wonders. Will they meet in my heart?

She ducks under again, her hair floating out around her in the hot, strawberry-scented water. Then slowly, ceremonially, she lifts her arms out of the water and clasps her hands together above her head, her fingers interlocking.

As they touch, Annie feels the weight of a thousand years of unbearable loneliness in her arms. They become suddenly leaden, a dead weight locked in position above her head. Annie struggles to sit up, and finds she can’t. Her arms are too heavy to move and they are weighing her down. The surface of the water is tantalizingly close, only a few millimetres above her nose, but she can’t reach it. She opens her mouth to cry out and water rushes in.

The two shades in Annie’s arms experience nearly four and a half minutes of bliss before her hands drop to her sides and splash limply into the water. Then they are alone again.

For a fraction of a second after Annie dies, there is silence.

Then the shades start to scream.

Playing for Time III

'Sweetness,' laughs Triphis, 'I don't think we can honestly say you improved their situation.'

Tefen pouts. 'But you can't say it wasn't interesting to watch.'

'That is true.' She yawns and stretches. 'Goodness! We've been playing for hours. And my equations are starting to rub off. I want a snack before the next round.'

The next round, thinks Tefen, gleefully. He decides to push it, just a little. 'At some point I should get back to my science project.'

'Oh, screw your "science project",' says Triphis irritably. 'It's gross, anyway.'

Which is intentional, just to annoy her. Tefen touches the control that opens the curtain, and pads over to the window, looking down at the Earth.

'You're naked!' giggles Triphis. 'The neighbours will see!'

'I should show them my butt,' he says. The ship looks like a classroom model of a molecule, hovering above a chaotic Earth. 'What a hash they made of it.'

Triphis says, 'I could've told you that would happen. So much for just picking a reality at random.'

He sighs. 'You're right. I'll be more deliberate next time.'

'Next time it's my turn! What we need is to install someone who'll make a deliberate effort to make the Earth a better place.'

Tefen starts pulling on his trousers, but Triphis waves at him to stop. 'I'll have something brought,' she says, pressing a different control on the desk. 'I want to go back over some of those formulae with you. See if we can't narrow down which strings need to be pulled. We'll eat a bite and then I'll show you how it's done!'

Obediently, Tefen stretches out on his belly on the carpet, pressing his nose up to the glassy ball like a curious cat. But for a moment, just a moment, he closes his eyes, shutting off the throbbing nets of symbols reaching for his mind. There's more going on in the device than just the mathematics of time's tipping-points – so much more to explore. After just two sessions he's already feverish with fatigue, out of focus, like he has butterflies in his skull.

He opens his eyes and lets the patterns push their way inside. The show must go on.

Triphis' elegant ship is the pinnacle of her collection, an artefact so ancient and so peculiarly made that it's probably from a previous universe. Each bubble, from the largest ones kilometres across to the tiniest ones a tenth of that size, is a swingeingly perfect sphere down to the nano level. Most have had floors and halls and rooms and gravity installed to accommodate the inhabitants. In fact, as far as Tefen knows, the ship proper is only the hull and the engines; everything else, from life support to security systems, has been awkwardly grafted on, and needs constant maintenance to stop it from going dangerously peculiar.

Triphis often boasts about her ship. She can only use a fraction of its capabilities, but she's the only one who knows how to use them. The ship moves around by changing its inertial mass, which is supposed to be impossible. It's undetectable and impregnable and can crush an enemy by ramping up its mass to neutron star levels and running over them like a lorry. It's as though the ship can cooperate with the laws of this universe or disregard them as necessary.

The walls of the bubbles, Triphis says, are made from stable superdense exotic matter, its particles crushed from spheres into irregular dodecahedrons. The interior and exterior are coated with programmable electrons, which in theory could be changed into anything you liked – weapons, sensors, furniture – but the manual was long lost.

What Tefen would like to know is why there are a different number of bubbles every time they're counted. Always a twin prime between two and three hundred. And yet nobody ever seems to be bothered that parts of the ship apparently go missing every so often. On the other hand, the crew and passengers only use few dozen rooms, and those few are always present. Plus the doors are automatically created where bubbles touch, so it's not like you'd ever accidentally open one onto vacuum. So why worry?

The one room Tefen wishes would get lost and stay lost is the revivification bulb - the red tank. He'd only been dipped in the tank twice, and only once for cosmetic surgery. (Triphis likes her boys lean, muscular, tan-skinned and long-eyed. Another rumour: she's trying to recreate her long-lost One True Love, who may or may not have been Mr. Triphis.) Quiver has been through the damn thing six times and is, frankly, starting to go a bit funny.

The day after his chat with Chrys, Tefen had gone looking for Quiver. Nobody knew why Quiver was called that, and these days even Quiver himself didn't seem to remember. Tefen found him in the solarium, a roomy bubble fitted out with a tiled floor and a slot which let in just the right wavelengths of sunlight.

Quiver lay face down on a flat deckchair. Tefen didn't want to startle him awake, so he pulled off his boots and tiptoed over, but Quiver lifted his head and cushioned it on his arms. His eyes always had those dark circles, that sleepy look, no matter how much time he spent sleeping, which was most of it.

'What?' he said, fuzzily.

'How long have you been here, Quiver?'

'Dunno. Half an hour?'

'No! I mean, with Triphis. On the ship.'

'What sort of question is that?'

'It's just a question. I was just curious.'

'You're not thinking of starting trouble again, are you?'

'Oh,' said Tefen. 'You talked to Chrys.'

'We knew what we were getting ourselves into when we came here,' said Quiver.

'No,' said Tefen. 'I don't think we did.' He was already sweating in the solarium's heat. 'But we're all in the same ship.'

'No we're not,' said Quiver. 'Tefen, you mustn't make the mistake of thinking that Chrys and I are your friends. The three of us are more like survivors in a lifeboat that's not quite large enough for all of us.'

'You've taught me some crucial things about living here. I've taken a lot of pressure off both of you. I'm not asking you to abandon ship along with me.'

'You know,' says Quiver, raising a leaden finger, 'you know I won't say or do anything that might get me thrown back in that bloody tank. You know it and she knows it.'

'Well of course,' says Tefen soothingly. 'Nobody wants another dip in there, least of all me.'

'Not even once more.' He's shivering all over, despite the warmth.

'But I'm not asking you to abandon ship with me.'

'She knows that if one of us could go, the other two could follow. Her grip would have to tighten. She must maintain control, Tefen. That's what every magician wants, after all. Control.'

'She has that,' sighs Tefen, leaning his head against the deckchair. 'The new thing she's done with her hair!'

'I thought I was going to die,' sighs Quiver. 'It was like falling in love with her all over again.'

'Sometimes I wonder if we're really in love with her at all,' says Tefen softly. 'Sometimes I wonder if the red weed didn't do something to us.'

'Would that make the feelings any less real?' wonders Quiver. Tefen doesn't have an answer. 'How did she get you to go in there, the first time?'

'She called it the Fountain of Youth. She said I was damaged by malnutrition and bioaccumulative toxins. That even with the change in my circumstances I wouldn't live many more years if I didn't get – I think she called it a makeover. Stop laughing, panda-face! What she told me was probably true. What about you? Was it supposed to be a health spa?'

'Nope,' says Quiver. 'She said it would make me taller.'

'That was all?'

'The first time, you only have to think you're going to like it.' He rolled over, with the slow effort of a sunbathing seal, adjusting his towel and slipping on his sunglasses. 'Tell you what, though, she said something odd at the time. It's always stuck with me.' Tefen waits. 'She said that... what's in there was here before any of the rest of us. That it knows more about the ship than any of us, including her. That it knew – and this was her exact phrase – all the ins and outs.'

'Well, if there is a clue in there... if anyone would have found it by now, you would have.'

'You'd think so,' said Quiver, locking eyes with him. 'Wouldn't you? After six times?' Tefen swallows. 'Surely she was only playing with me. Unless there was something right in front of my face which I simply couldn't understand.' Quiver's eyelids droop again. 'It's too late now. The next time I go in it's as scrap biomass.' Tefen looks puzzled. 'When Triphis is quite finished with someone, she puts him or her into the tank for good.'

'Is that what happens to us?' said Tefen, alarmed. 'We become raw materials?'

'What were you imagining? Being put out to pasture on some quiet little planet?' Quiver snorts. 'Haven't you noticed yet that while things and people come into the ship, they never go back out?'

'That only makes going out sound like an even better idea.'

Tefen's lover had insisted that he think of people as temporary associates, never as friends or allies. On the midden, it made sense: people tended to cheat, or vanish, or die. When everyone's starving, it's the cheats who survive, his lover had whispered on a cold night at the junk pile's edge. The first ones to die are the ones with a sense of fairness.

Quiver was right. He and Chrys are not Tefen's friends. In any struggle between the three of them, the only advantages Tefen has are his novelty and his mask. Apparently, neither of them had shown any aptitude for Faction practices. A mask, Tefen knew, could be a life-saving thing, and not in just some metaphorical emotional way.

Tefen's temporary lover had been working a bad patch of the midden for over a year when they first got together. Within a few months he'd been showing bad symptoms. It was becoming impossible to avoid sucking up toxic dust and fumes, wherever you went.

Then a miracle: Tefen found three breathing masks at the bottom of a crate of discarded industrial supplies. They'd been crushed under heavy junk, but he knew a tinker who could put that sort of thing back together. One was like new, two were banged up. The tinker took the filter and the strap from the battered mask and used them to repair the nearly-new one. She kept the remaining mask as payment.

Tefen wore his breathing mask every day they went out raking over the midden. The pigment industry on the planet above was booming; with the midden floating with fine dust, its colours blending together into a dull grey-brown, it was a particularly bad summer for breathing. The mask saved Tefen's life, but within four months, he was alone. It was the one great regret of his life.

If you could see me now, love.

'Tefen,' called Quiver, rolling over on his couch. 'You realise that Chrys and I would be mad not to mention our conversations with you to the missus.'

He turned, making sure his eyes meet Quiver's. 'Yeah,' he said, 'I know that.'

'Just as long as we're both clear on it.'

'Go back to sleep, mate.'

Quiver didn't need to be told twice.

The Mountains Are Higher At Home
Juliet Kemp

Dear Diary,

Bretet and I met a human! We went out into the forest again, after school, through the hole in the fence. There'll be trouble if we're ever caught, but it's totally worth it. Sr. Xorat talks all the time on the school excursions and you can't stop and look when you want to.

Anyway, we found this hole in the ground, and Bretet thought an animal lived in it.

'Look, there are all those bits that have cracked off the tree,' Bretet said, making out like he knows all about carbon lifeforms. 'Something must have put them there.'

'Leaves,' I said, remembering our last Earth lesson. 'They're called leaves.'

That was when the humans appeared. They move so fast!

'We can sit on those rocks,' one of them said.

Humans are really tall and thin, and they look like they should just wobble right over. This one had brown stuff on its top. Bretet and I just sat there, shocked. I've never seen a real human, only on the screen. They're not supposed to be in the forest any more than Bretet and I are.

'You idiot,' the other human said. This one had yellow stuff on its top. 'That's not a rock. That's a Kyalite. Look, have you ever seen a rock that green colour? And that, like, heat haze around it, that's where it messes with the, the particles of everything.'

The composition of the air had changed while it was talking, and brown-stuff had already started backing away.

'S'freakish, 's what it is,' brown-stuff muttered, already mostly out of the clearing.

Yellow-stuff was moving a bit more slowly, with its head on one side, still looking at us.

'Stop!' Bretet said, out loud like a human.

I stared at him.

'Won't you stay and talk to us?' he said. 'We shouldn't be here either.'

'Hang on,' yellow-stuff said. 'Look at the size of them. They're Kyalite, right enough, but I think they're just kids.'

Yellow-stuff folded itself up, so it was a more sensible kind of shape, and more like our height.

'You're kids, right?'

I can understand Human well enough - it's just air movement, after all, and I like listening to the human tapes in the archives. But I was shocked that Bretet could make those kind of air movements. Only field agents communicate with humans. Like my first-parent, but she's never shown me how she does it.

Bretet asked lots of questions, while I just gawped. After a while, brown-stuff came and bent itself down next to yellow-stuff. Bretet asked them about where they live, and about whether they remembered anything before we got here, and about the trees and things. Then I realised that it was past time for us to get back.

We're going to meet them again. Bretet says they know much more about the forest than Sr. Xorat does. Next time I'm going to try human talking, too.

Bretet finally convinced Liana to take us back to where they live, just outside the forest. Humans aren't allowed in the reserve areas, and most of the planet is reserve areas since we got here. There were lots of buildings in the human settlement, surrounded by flat pieces like the meadows in the reserve, but these had human food crops growing in them, and they didn't look as healthy as the meadows do. There weren't many trees, either, and the few that I saw weren't as green and lush as the ones in the forest. They had lots of broken-off branches. I don't think the humans are looking after them very well.

Sr. Xorat keeps telling us how the humans don't need that much space. The planet needs the space more, Sr. Xorat says. The human area seemed crowded to me, though. The buildings all had lots of people in them, adults and children and older adults sharing the same dwelling. And there wasn't any space around the dwellings, other than the paths and roadways. I wouldn't like living there. I mean, obviously on Earth there are only a few of us in the compound, so everyone has their own rooms and even their own buildings if they want, with their own big open areas outside as well. It's good for you to spend time outside. I really like our garden. On Kyal my parents tell me we wouldn't have quite as much space, but in all the pictures I've seen of Kyal I've never seen so many of us sharing a single dwelling. I don't think it would be very

healthy. But humans are smaller, so maybe they don't mind being crowded like we do. They used to live in even bigger settlements, before we came, after all. A bit like Kyal cities, made of dead Earth rock, but without the outside space of a Kyal city. All those became part of the reserve areas, when the first Kyal team arrived. The humans were moved out to settlements like this one, and the cities were taken down to let the forest take over. Human cities aren't good for the planet, and they're not good for humans either. They are better off in the new settlements we made for them, that's what Sr. Xorat says.

Still. The humans didn't seem very happy. Some of them made the composition of the air change in a way I didn't recognise. I asked Liana about it afterwards and she said that they're ill, and they don't get enough resources to get fixed. I thought we were supposed to handle that sort of thing? Rashid just laughed when I said that.

Bretet kept finding new people to talk to. I listened, mostly, and talked to Liana. The others seemed to find the way I move the air around hard to understand.

We nearly didn't get back home in time. I got back into my room a couple of seconds before my second-parent came to check up on me.

I don't know what to think, about the space, and the being ill. Maybe Rashid is just the sort of person who is grumpy about everything? Or probably they just don't understand properly. I'm sure Sr. Xorat or my parents could explain it, if I could ask them.

'But Sahran,' Bretet said, 'it's basic ecology.'

'If it's basic ecology,' I argued, 'why isn't it policy already?'

'Because they don't know the humans like we do.'

Like Bretet does, anyway. I try, but even after thirty of their annual cycles, I can't communicate with them as well as Bretet, and I don't understand how they think. They seem to go very quickly, and not to think ahead of themselves.

Bretet doesn't always think ahead of himself, either.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Well, obviously they need some assistance. I mean, I'm not arguing that they didn't get the planet into this mess, and it's right that we're here to rescue Earth from that. But what we're doing now is good for everything but the primary species! That can't be right.'

'We do look after them,' I objected.

That's what the Kyalite do, after all. We look after other people's planets for them, when they've messed their planets up. And on Earth, the policy is to keep the humans away from the delicate parts, until the damage is fixed and they can be trusted to look after it themselves again.

'We don't, not properly, and you know it, Sahran. You've seen what I've seen. We neglect them.'

'We don't look after those areas like we do the reserves, you mean,' I contradicted him. 'And no, we don't. The policy is that we keep the humans away from the reserves, so those parts can heal, and we leave the non-reserve parts to the humans. So they can look after those parts. All the beings in the reserves are doing well. Outside the reserves, maybe the humans aren't doing so well, but neither are any of the other beings, the plants and the birds and the animals and all that. So obviously that just shows that the humans don't look after Earth properly.'

'No,' Bretet said. 'Well, yes. Well - look, they need help to learn, sure. But they're in such a small area, it's hard for them to take the long view. We need to support them in taking the proper role of a primary species, and safeguarding the whole ecosystem.'

'And you and I have to stay here to do that?'

'The policy doesn't do it. Our parents and their team-mates don't spend enough time with the humans to be able to do it. Us, Sahran, you and me, we're the only people with the knowledge from both sides. If we stay when our parents leave, we can help the new team, help them construct good policy, help them really get to know Earth and all of its species.'

I couldn't help vibrating in sympathy with him.

And - in truth, I couldn't bear to leave Earth. I was born here. Kyal is where my family are from. But Earth is home. I want to help it back to what it should be. When I stand in the reserve, and look up at the trees - they're so much taller now than when I was small - I can't bear the idea of leaving here. I'm an adult now, I finished school this year, and I don't have to go back with my parents if I don't want to.

The parents went away today. Bretet and I watched the ship go this morning. It feels kind of strange, to be on our own here now. I mean, of course we're not on our own - the new team arrived yesterday when the ship landed. That was one of the advantages we

said there would be to us staying. We can help the new team settle in and make up for the short handover.

Bretet didn't seem that bothered by his parents leaving. I feel strange. We both decided to stay, and we've both argued the whole thing out so much, between ourselves and with our families, so I suppose I should have been used to the idea. It felt different, though, when they left. I don't regret it - I think we are needed here. But - oh, I don't know.

Bretet was keen to put the final touches to our presentation. With a new team arriving, the plan is that it's a good time to persuade them to introduce some changes. We, Bretet and I, want to start allowing some humans to work alongside the Kyal teams in the reserves, so that they can learn what we do and learn to do better themselves. The reserves are healthy now, far healthier than the human-controlled areas outside the reserves. Bretet thinks that if the humans start learning and practising in the healthy areas, then they'll see the positive progress, and that will encourage them to use better techniques in their own areas. And with us there to keep an eye on them, they can't do any more damage. It does make a lot of sense.

The bit we disagree on is what to do with the human-controlled areas. Bretet thinks that if we just focus on educating them, letting them learn, then they'll be able to make the changes in those areas themselves. And we can support them if they ask; but he thinks they need the freedom to make their own decisions. I think we should make more effort to support them outside the reserves as well as inside them. They don't seem happy, the humans in the reserves. And the land is already so poor, it's going to be hard for them even once they do know better. It seems to me that we should be helping them more, not just leaving them to make further mistakes. Surely they already made enough mistakes with their 'freedom' before we arrived?

We've been arguing about it for ages, but finally we agreed to put both options in, and see what the new team think. It's best to implement things slowly, anyway; although Bretet is impatient to see change.

We had our first proper meeting with the new team today. I suppose really I should have expected them to be bringing instructions or policy or something from Kyal, but it just didn't

occur to me.

Bretet did our presentation, and he was really inspiring. He spoke with such powerful vibrations about how the humans need to be educated, treated better, given more freedom to learn to manage Earth themselves. I already knew all of this, but I was still vibrating in sympathy. But Terel, the new Administrator, just sat there, more like an actual Earth rock than one of us. I couldn't feel any vibrations from her at all, sympathetic or antithetic. Then, once Bretet had finished, she got out her own presentation and told everyone about the changes.

'The reserves will be abolished,' she said.

Bretet got all wide-eyed, like, are they just going to do what we want, just like that?

Everywhere, all at once? I thought. Because I didn't think they were ready for that. Not right now, not without some help. But maybe that was what she meant? To help them?

Then she pulled the map up, and it didn't look like the reserves were being abolished at all. They were just much bigger.

'The humans will be restricted to these areas, and we will continue our work of restoring the damage across the rest of the planet. Our focus is and must be the planet and its well-being.'

The reserves are still there, she's just describing it the other way around. It's the human areas that are 'restricted' now. They're smaller, and human movement is going to be even more controlled. Everyone must have felt Bretet pulsing disapproval.

I don't know where we go from here. I mean, Terel is right, the planet is the important thing. But I can't help worrying about the humans. Maybe Bretet and I can try to reduce the impact on them?

As I was thinking that, Terel gave out assignments. We both asked for field agent, when we were planning our own proposal, but now I figured we'd get desk jobs. I did. Bretet didn't. Bretet's a field agent, like he wanted. Just for a moment, when she told us, I felt something flicker across his fields. He can't have fixed the assignments, though, can he? Wouldn't Terel have noticed? Maybe if she hadn't looked at them before... but surely, if he'd done that, he'd have done mine too. But I've been sent down to Archives. I can't do anything from there. What was the point of staying?

After that, Bretet dragged me out across the reserve to the human village. That village won't be here any more, by the new maps.

'Should we tell them?' I asked, as we were on our way over there,

and Bretet vibrated 'no' all over the place.

'I've got an idea,' he explained. 'I'll tell them myself, if I have to, but I might be able to do something about it.'

When we got there I found out that we were there for Liana's funeral. They have such short lives, humans. Except - Liana was 50, I worked it out. And I'm sure that Sr. Xorat, when we were learning about humans and Earth and all, gave human lifespans as 70. Maybe Liana was unusual.

Humans put their dead into the ground, which is quite efficient as it recycles their carbon. I wonder if I'll ever see a Kyal death ceremony? I suppose I'll go back there eventually.

It was pretty heavy going, after the ceremonial part. Bretet was talking to everyone, but I couldn't bear to. And I couldn't see any of the humans I've known. One of the younger ones came to speak to me, and said she was a child of Rashid. I asked where he was; apparently he died about a cycle ago. She didn't want to speak much, after that, and none of the other humans came near. Not like Liana and Rashid, who were always friendly to us.

On the way back, Bretet asked me for a favour. He wants me to use my archive access to alter the map schema for the redistribution.

'Terel will notice,' I said.

'Not if I don't do anything big. I mean, she doesn't know anything about Earth yet anyway, right?' Bretet said. 'I just want to move things around a little. I can keep that village, maybe, and I can shift the outlines a bit, give them better territory. Nothing obvious. But it could make a big difference to them.'

I was a bit nervous about it - I mean, Terel would have chipped pieces off us if she'd found out. But I did want to help the humans; just, preferably with a bit less risk. Still. I said yes, and Bretet spent half the night fiddling with the map. Then I put it back on the disk, neat as neat, as though it had never been touched.

'Handy, I guess, that I'm in Archives,' I said, and Bretet's fields flickered again.

Terel barely even looked at it the next morning; just threw the data-disk at the field team and sent them off. I guess we got away with it.

It's quiet, down in the Archives. No one else comes down here. I like it, now I'm used to it. It's been nearly twenty annual cycles now,

after all. It's interesting, too. The humans aren't the first primary species here; just the current one. Bretet thinks they're important, but that's a short-sighted view, really. It is the planet which abides, not any one species on it.

It's not that I don't care any more. I tried to tell Bretet that, the last time I saw him. He came down to tell me that Rashid's child had died, and to invite me to come visit for the funeral. Another funeral. I wasn't that keen, but it was the first time that cycle that I'd seen Bretet, or had a chance to go out to the forest, so I went.

Bretet seems to be faster every time I see him. I could barely keep up with him. The village was still in the same place; but the rest of the enclosure has shrunk, again. The trees around it are bigger, and even more beautiful.

'Rashid's child?' I said, as we moved through the forest. 'Human generations are so fast.'

'They shouldn't be this fast,' Bretet said, grimly.

When we got there, everything was even more decrepit than before. The humans' faces were pointier, and the plants and animals inside their enclosed area were even less healthy than those outside in the forest. It just looked so much worse than I remember when I was younger. I kept glancing outwards, towards the forest, wanting to be back out there in the quiet.

There didn't seem to be a properly old generation now, not one that looked wrinkly and saggy like Liana and Rashid had by the end. And this time, the humans didn't just avoid me this time; they pointed, and spoke quietly to each other, too quietly for me to hear. I told Bretet I wanted to leave.

'You see?' Bretet said afterwards. 'It's pretty clear to me that the policy is extinction, whatever the official line from Terel is.'

I vibrated this way and that. On the one hand, it didn't feel right, in the village. On the other hand...

'They did a pretty useless job of managing their planet,' I said. 'And there's no sign that they're learning any better.'

If they wanted to learn to manage their planet, they should be reaching out to me, to us, when they get the opportunity. They should be trying.

'There isn't any scope for them to learn better,' Bretet argued. 'They're being squeezed away from everything else.'

'But look at the state of the areas they do have access to,' I said. 'Barren, dusty, over-worked. Then look at this.' I gestured at the

healthy, diverse forest around us.

'That's just because they've been restricted to the worst land, for their needs, and too small a patch of it at that.'

'Then they should reduce their population,' I argued.

I didn't entirely believe what I was saying, but I didn't think Bretet was seeing clearly either.

Bretet's vibrations were fast, heating the air. 'You don't understand. Sure, the rest of the planet looks healthy and green and all the rest of it. But we don't really know what we're doing either. Planets need all their species, not just the ones we deem suitable to manage it. Why do we know better how to manage it than the species who live here?'

'But they were wrecking it, before,' I said. 'Even you can't claim otherwise!'

'Even so,' Bretet said. 'Maybe we shouldn't be wading in like this. Maybe we should just leave well enough alone. Maybe they needed to screw it up to learn to get it right, and we've screwed that up in turn by interfering.'

'Maybe, maybe, maybe,' I said. 'More likely, the whole ecosystem would have collapsed and screwed the humans and half the rest of the planetary species. Why aren't you arguing for them?' I paused. 'Isn't that the definition of a parasite, that it destroys its host?'

Bretet vibrated unevenly for a while, then said, 'But you can't argue, surely, that the situation now is right? How can we claim that we're just stewards while they learn better, if we're squeezing them into extinction.'

He had a point. I tried to bring it up at the next team meeting, but Terel just looked straight through me and said that it didn't sound like I was talking about anything from the Archives, did it now? And Bretet wasn't there. He always seems to be out on patrol, now.

I've been looking right back in the Archives, thousands and hundreds of thousands of cycles ago, to look at what happened to the old primary species. Maybe what's happening to the humans is just part of a cycle; or maybe what the humans did to the planet is part of a cycle, and we're interfering. The parasites destroy the host, and then the parasites in their turn are destroyed? The more I look, though, the more it looks like this isn't the first time we've been here. That it isn't the first time we've done this. It's all side references, though; it's not part of the official story. I don't know if I should tell someone, to check whether they see what I'm seeing. I

don't think Terel is interested. And I haven't seen Bretet since that last visit to the surface. I guess he has other priorities, now, than visiting me.

The last primary species were very different; that's all part of the official record. They were vertebrates, like humans, but they flew. Not quite like birds, though modern birds are descended from them. We have some of the human record in the Archives, and they call them 'theropods' there. There were other related animals around at the time too, but they all died out, all at once, theropods and sauropods and many, many others. The human records don't have a definite explanation, although they talked about an 'impact event'.

The Kyal records, on the other hand, show that we were here, just before the theropods and their relatives died out. It was a routine fly-past, though, according to the records, just checking out the planet while the patrol was in this part of the galaxy. Not a landing and still less the establishment of a guardianship. The patrol records I have describe a planet that was struggling to support its life, but the crew could only speculate about whether it was the fault of the theropods or just part of the natural cycle. And there's a reference to an urgent message sent back to Kyal, but not what that message said. That's all there is.

The next clear reference to Earth is from a different patrol, on a much later fly-past, by which time the theropods and the others had all disappeared and the planet was recovering. The thing is, though - that's the next clear reference. But there's some redacted information, and some records that are just missing altogether. I can't find where the first patrol crew went after that, for example. Their ship just drops out of the records for a few (Kyal) cycles, then it pops up on the other side of the galaxy, with no comment. The funny thing is, when it reappears, its armament has changed and it's equipped for meteor-chasing. I can't help wondering whether they had any hand in this 'impact event'.

It's a ridiculous idea, though, and I'm probably imagining things, stuck down here in the Archives. I'm sure my parents would tell me not to be silly. It probably is all just part of the cycle. Right?

The only meeting I get invited to now is the big annual-cycle meeting. I struggled to control my vibrations as I arrived this time. Bretet would have to be there, and I could talk to him. I could find out what was going on on the surface; I could just speak to

someone. But as I cast my field around the room, Bretet was the only one who wasn't there. It took me a moment to calm down and find a place to put myself. Terel was already calling the meeting to order; and she didn't say anything about Bretet's unauthorised absence. She just spread maps over the room, and passed round another new policy.

'As you can see,' Terel explained, 'we've increased the forest areas again, here and here, and the grazing species over here are managing the prairie quite well.'

I examined the map as she spoke. 'Wait,' I said. 'Those forest areas - isn't that where the largest human enclosure was?'

'Yes,' Terel agreed. 'We moved them into these other enclosed areas.'

All the human enclosures were smaller again. I remembered that visit to the village, the last time I saw Bretet.

'Surely that can't be healthy for them,' I protested. 'The planet is doing so well now. Why can't we treat the humans as a kind of grazing or predatory species, with their own position in the ecology.' I looked again. 'And look, here - there's no way for the separate enclosed areas to communicate with one another. Genetically...'

The temperature in the room had gone down. But I did, actually, know what I was talking about. I've read a lot, of everyone's specialities, over all those cycles down in the Archives.

'This is an appropriate implementation of our policy,' Terel said. She was vibrating just a little offbeat.

'But this is just driving the humans into a hole,' I argued.

The stillness in the room was thick and palpable.

I wondered, afterwards, if I can contact my parents, back on Kyal. I'm sure they would care about the humans as well as the rest of the planet. They always said that it was important to consider the primary species in the ecosystem. I'm sure they wouldn't want to do this to the humans. Would they?

But then, maybe Terel is right. She understands the policy; and the Kyal have been doing this for a very long time. She's been on Kyal more recently than me. She must have been told what to do. Maybe this is best for Earth, after all. Maybe my parents would just tell me that - and it takes so long to send messages, anyway.

I need to contact Bretet. That's the only thing I can think of to do.

I don't know what to do.

I went up to the surface, for the first time in a long while. I started off in the forests again, although I knew, really, that I likely wouldn't find Bretet there. I knew he would be with the humans. I do love the forests, though; and there's so much of them, now. I wasted time, I suppose, just enjoying them.

Bretet had registered a route towards the smaller pole. As the forests expanded and sequestered more carbon, it was icing over again. I took a flyer much of the way, but I set down and continued on my own base from a little way away from the human enclosure.

The trees around me were young; dating from shortly after the Kyal had arrived, a while before my own time. Their branches entwined with one another, and birds sang. Deep drifts of dead and decaying leaves shifted under my base, and thickets of spiky curving greenery grew in patches where the sun was able to filter through the tree canopy. A few dark fruits were drying out as the Earth turned in its annual cycle and this area grew daily colder.

Once or twice I detected animal tracks. I knew much more now, than I had when Bretet and I were small; much more about all Earth's species, except the single one that Bretet had chosen to direct his focus towards. It was harder to move, now that I'm bigger, though, if I didn't want to damage any of the trees. I stopped from time to time, just to feel their vibrations around me. They were slowing down with the season. It's best to listen to the trees in the early part of the annual cycle, when it's getting warmer and they're waking up. There's so much going on for them then. But even now I found it soothing.

Suddenly, the trees thinned out, then ceased altogether. A short distance of empty space, grass and small plants covering the brown earth, then a fence, high and humming. Much higher than I remembered.

Beyond the fence was scratched-up dirt, a few plants sticking out of the ground, and a young human sitting by them. Tending them? Playing a game? As I watched, another young human came up, and the first one shouted something and threw a stone. A short way behind the tiny field, human dwelling-places were stacked closely together, and I could feel from the composition of the air how many beings were crammed into the space.

Couldn't these humans co-operate, instead of guarding and fighting and throwing stones? The child looked out towards me, and I

shrunk further back into the abundant greenery surrounding me. After a moment, I began to follow the line of the fence, staying within the cover of the trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of Bretet. Then I could just talk to him, and I wouldn't have to identify myself to the humans, or to walk into the enclosure. The bare, lifeless enclosure.

I looked between the forest and the enclosure. How could I look at that and not think that humans are parasites, when they do that to their own land? How can I not believe that they're irresponsible? Surely they should be able to limit themselves to the space they have?

Even when we keep shrinking that space?

I felt Bretet's vibrations so clearly that I looked around for him, but there was no one there.

Surely, the humans are capable of looking after their land, if they cared. Surely.

I nearly fell over them, while I was walking around. I was keeping back a bit in the forest, away from that fence. I wasn't looking where I was going; but I heard them just in time to stop.

A handful of humans, hunkered down in the forest by a tree, leaning in to hear one another speak. They shouldn't be here, of course they shouldn't be here; how were they here at all? I looked around, tuning in carefully to the disturbances in the air, in the ground, and finally spotted a hole half-hidden under a bush. A tunnel? If they were coming out here to forage, illicitly, and the forest was still surviving, then maybe that was evidence that they're capable. But if they were supposed to be looking for food, why were they gathered like this?

It took me a few moments to tune into their speech. It must be longer than I thought that I haven't been around humans. Or has the language changed since I was young?

'Sure you can do it?' one of them asked.

'Did the fence, didn't I?' another replied.

'Fence is one thing. Flyers is another.'

'Said, can do it.'

'Won't do if it blows up before it gets back there. Won't do if it goes the wrong way,' a third human said.

'Know. Been over it enough. Said, can do it.'

'When's flyer coming?'

'Next time the rock goes away. Bring it back with safeties off.'

'Still not sure it'll do enough damage,' the first one who'd spoken grumbled.

'Best idea yet,' someone else said. 'Rock can't think of better either.'

It was slowly sinking in. A flyer. They were going to blow up one of our flyers; or rather, send it back to us to blow up there. And 'the rock' they were talking about, 'the rock' who obviously was helping them, could only be Bretet.

I don't know what to do. I should tell Terel, straight away. I want to find Bretet. I keep thinking of the difference between the enclosure and the forest. I can't believe that the plan would work. A flyer engine is barely going to put a dent in our centre, surely? Unless Bretet plans to do something else too. But then, even if it only does a little damage, even if it only hurts a single Kyal... I cannot just let this go.

I cannot see Bretet anywhere. I cannot go into the enclosure, not now.

I cannot betray my own species for another. I cannot let them hurt my colleagues. These humans are destructive, and they always have been, of the planet, each other, and now of us. Perhaps our policy really is what Earth needs.

I wish I had been able to speak to Bretet.

Why didn't he tell me?

Bretet wanted to see me. He's in confinement, until the ship comes from home to take him back for trial. I imagine the verdict will be pulverisation.

'Why did you tell them?' was the first thing he said, when I went in.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I asked.

His vibrations were erratic, but I couldn't tell quite how. Shame? Anger?

'You didn't understand,' he said, after a moment. 'I tried...'

'You weren't even there, this last annual-cycle meeting. You haven't been here.'

'It was too late,' Bretet said. 'You needed to care a couple of dozen annual-cycles ago, when we first took these roles. When the policy started changing.'

'You could have told me!' I said.

We were both silent for a moment.

'Maybe it's still not too late,' he said. 'Maybe...'

'Too late for what?' I asked.

'To stop what they're doing,' he said, shifting towards me, the air shifting with his passionate intensity. 'To let the humans take their place, to work with them, to allow the planet to go back to how it should be structured. They're the primary species, Sahran, not a parasite!'

'What makes you think I want any of those things?' I said, coldly.

Bretet shrank back.

'Look at what they've done to the land they do have,' I went on. 'Look at what they did before we arrived. Not a parasite? Are you sure?'

'But look at the pressure we have put them under,' Bretet argued. 'How can any species manage itself when there are simply not enough resources for them?'

'A truly intelligent species would have done better than that,' I said. 'Humans are destructive, and that is all there is to it.'

'This isn't like you, Sahran,' Bretet said. The passion had fled from his words, and I could feel bewildered sadness. 'You remember, when we were younger, when we planned to help the humans take their place in their own ecosystem, to support them...'

'I remember when we planned, yes,' I said. 'I don't remember you thinking of that any time lately.'

'Sahran, please,' he said. 'If I offended you, I'm sorry. It seemed to me that you were losing interest, that you were focussed on your own studies...'

'And now when you've got yourself into trouble you want me to take over your grand plans?' I asked. 'Your plans to betray your own species, your own colleagues, in favour of these incompetent parasites.' I liked that word, now.

'Sahran, surely you can see that things will only get worse for these humans unless someone will champion them. Maybe I did it wrong, but you, you are so much more thoughtful than I. You can handle it better...'

'No, Bretet,' I said. 'If you wanted my help, the time to ask for it was long before this. I see no evidence that your pets are worth championing. Or that you are.'

I could feel the vibrations of despair in the cell. I can still feel them down here in my own lair.

I wonder if my forebears, back all those hundreds of thousands of cycles ago, felt this way as they contemplated that other primary

species?

I miss Bretet, as he was. I miss myself, as I was.

The ship landed this morning. Bretet and I are the only ones aboard at this moment; the crew are experiencing the management team's hospitality. I believe there is a meal, and an aircraft tour of the planet, and a short hike in the most hospitable of the forest areas.

I will miss the forests.

Bretet was secured on board immediately after arrival. I boarded shortly afterwards. Terel gave me a great sheaf of documentation to take back with me, and recited a great deal of nonsense about best wishes, none of it disguising her gleeful vibrations. I don't imagine anyone will take over my job.

I found a note, just before I left, in the Archives. It was hidden within the records from that time before, from the Archivist then, collating the records back on Kyal. It confirmed what I thought: that we were here before, and that we wiped out that primary species. I added another note, hidden in the same way, to the current records. I doubt anyone now will find it, but maybe in the far future someone will.

Bretet's cell is two floors below my room. I cannot feel any of his vibrations from here; he might as well not be here. Yet I would swear I can sense him, straight through the ship.

I have never been to Kyal. Earth is my home. But I cannot watch Terel continue to implement the current policies, cannot watch the humans destroyed piecemeal, however destructive they are; cannot take Bretet's place and foment rebellion.

Would I, if I could? Once, long cycles ago, I would have pledged allegiance to Bretet's plans, and taken up the banner in the wake of his fall. Now - I can no longer speak to humans, I no longer know whether I believe Bretet, or what I myself said to him in that cell, or what our official policies say about primary species and parasites. I no longer know.

These humans - I stand by what I said to Bretet. A barbarous, thoughtless, uncontrolled species. Perhaps Terel is right, and the only answer is to control them, to squeeze them into a tiny part of this bounteous planet, to squeeze them until they vanish.

So, I go to Kyal, carrying with me the vibrations and air-composition of Earth and her forests, and I do not know what happens next. I do not know what will happen to public opinion,

and thus to the policy transmitted here, once Bretet and the story of Bretet's betrayal, land on Kyal. There will be a trial, and a blaze of publicity, and talk doubtless of barbarism and a lack of appreciation of our efforts; and only the accused to put the side of the humans. I cannot imagine that Bretet's arguments will go down well. So who knows what policy will be delivered back here after that?

Maybe our ancestors, our long-ago ancestors who were here before and who have carefully avoided claiming any credit, had the right of it. Maybe the best thing to hope for is for Terel to be sent permission to wipe the whole lot out at once. Then we can once again leave here altogether, and leave Earth to her own glorious devices.

I am trying to look forward to exploring Kyal's mountains, her famous mountains; but Kyal has no forests. Maybe after all this is over, when there are no humans or Kyalite or anyone else here anymore, I can come back here to the forests, and forget everything else.

Playing For Time IV

Tefen has lost track of how many days he and Triphis have been playing their game. His head buzzes a little when he tries to count back through the different worlds they've created. The one with the mermaids, the dictatorship of intelligent cosmic rays, the rise of the mutant pigeons, the one without the letter 'j', the one where theropods reigned and mammals never got bigger than dogs, the battle at both poles between rival gods from a parallel dimension... and dozens more. Sometimes his improvised worlds are fairly successful, sometimes hers are. But as replacements for the tragedy of human history, none of them have completely satisfied Triphis.

He reckons he needs to 'win' about a third of the time to keep her interested. It's not an easy task, given that she makes him do the heavy lifting of locating the points in time and logic they have to shift, given the other things he's quietly discovering inside the chronomasticon, given that he's barely slept for days.

With most of the missus' time taken up with the game, her shady crew have collapsed with incredible speed into laziness. The handful who still wear their uniforms properly complain – to Tefen, since Triphis shows no interest – that the rest are neglecting essential maintenance and security in favour of playing a marathon videogame tournament in their underwear. He can only shrug.

When he has five minutes to check on his science project, they've let it deteriorate badly. It's even more unpleasant than before, which is saying something. There isn't time to rework the rituals keeping it functioning; the best he can do for now is to program it with a violent aversion to insects. He really ought to put it into the red tank, but he hasn't the heart.

Tefen likes to tell himself that's why he didn't sell his lover's body to the medical students, but the real reason is that, riddled with toxins as it was, they wouldn't have bought it.

Sometimes he wonders whether they should have taken turns with the breathing mask. Given his lover's already damaged lungs, maybe he should even have had it most of the time. But then, he would have called Tefen an idiot for suggesting it; that way they'd probably both end up dying.

'Sin,' said Triphis, 'is what separates us from beasts and angels.'

Tefen said nothing. The missus was relaxing on a softly floating

coach, her shadowy form half-covered by an old gold dressing-gown worked with fractal patterns. It was the beginning of a drearily familiar speech.

'The power to disobey,' she said. 'An angel which disobeys a command from its Creator – well, that angel is simply destroyed. It loses everything.' She waves a dismissive hand. 'Angels are robots.'

Tefen concentrated on the bit of dressing-gown which was starting to slide off one of her breasts. The next bit was usually about animals. Triphis took a mouthful of wine, swallowed, and said, 'An animal which fails to follow its instincts – well, its fate will be along the same lines. Destruction. In any case, an animal really doesn't know what it's doing. More robots. So it's not strictly true to say that only a sentient being, a human being for example, is capable of disobedience. It's just that we're the only ones who can genuinely make the choice.'

Tefen only nodded. How many years had she been giving this speech? How old is Triphis? It's one of those questions they discussed idly in the hot tub. Her face and her lines were girlish, her long neck and her long thighs smooth, but with the red weed available – but would she ever subject herself to that horror? – what would you do for eternal life? Is she human, and if so, how human? And so on and so on. The way Triphis talked about the history of Earth, Tefen thought she had probably been inventing new sins before there was a way for anyone to write them down.

The cloth had slid almost to down to the nipple. Every small hair on his body was standing on end at the sight of it. 'Now if you can make a technology of sin,' she was saying, 'there's so much you can accomplish. Your will can shape your world. But don't use your disobedience carelessly, or it will destroy you in the end, as surely as it kills brutes and ruins angels.'

She stood up from the couch, fastened the gown around herself, and removed Tefen's gag. He closed his dry mouth, gratefully.

'I'm so disappointed in you, darling,' she said, unbolting the rest of his restraints. Uh-oh, thought Tefen. 'You're capable of so much patience! You only let yourself down when you don't use it.'

'Excuse me for asking,' he said, stretching tired muscles, 'but just how long have I been stuck to this wall?'

She shook her head. 'Oh, dulcissima. You need patience over the long term too.'

He grinned and said, 'I shudder to think what you've got in mind

now,' but she didn't return his smile. Instead she touched the door at its edge, where a thin double line of light marked the bubble's exit. A moment later, probably startled out of a nap, Chrys and Quiver stepped inside, and with them, four security drones.

'Oh, I don't believe it,' said Tefen, exasperatedly. He turned to Triphis. 'What've those whores been telling you!' Chrys and Quiver looked, respectively, at the floor and the ceiling.

'That you're looking to leave my service.'

'That's not true,' he said. 'I don't want to go.'

She pressed a mock-sorrowful hand to her breast. 'That everything I've given you isn't enough. That I'm not enough.'

'I don't. Want. To go.'

Triphis touched his left shoulderblade, where there was a tattoo that wasn't a tattoo, a device that looked partly like a lotus, partly like a scorpion, partly like pieces of clockwork.

She ran her fingernail down the design, making his whole skin run cold. 'I can take this off you in seconds,' she said, 'as though it had never been there.'

He turned to look at her over his shoulder. 'You'd do that?' he breathed.

Triphis laughed like the breaking of delicate glass. 'You do want to go!'

'Oh shit,' said Tefen.

'There's obviously something the matter with you,' she laughed. She jerked her head, and the security drones were running after him as he ran into the next partition. They dragged him out a moment later, a square of uniformed muscle with a flailing figure at its centre, embarrassingly naked except for its boots.

He kicked one of them before they got hold of both of his feet. 'I don't want to go!' he yelled. The door to Triphis' room pinched shut behind him.

He fought all the way to the revivification bubble. They couldn't put him inside unconscious – that was too dangerous.

The opening to the red tank irised open silently, letting out a puff of thick, intensely sweet air, like a room filled with cultivated flowers - and under it, at the edge of sensation, the smell of a fish shop late in the day.

He kicked and pushed at the wall with his heels as they forced him inside. 'You're a pain in the arse, Tefen,' said someone, and then he was sliding down into the near-darkness until he hit the layer of

sand at the bottom.

It was impossible to tell how large the tank was, though Tefen was pretty certain he'd seen it through windows, and if his sense of scale wasn't off, it was huge. Kilometres across – probably the largest bubble in the ship. Its inhabitant must need an entire ecosystem to support it.

He waded carefully through the tropical warm water, which even at the entrance came up almost to the tops of his knee-high boots. It must be ocean-deep in the middle. God only knew what lived out there.

Something brushed against his leg, and he splashed awkwardly away from the touch, barely keeping his balance. It was pointless, but he couldn't help the reaction. Last time he'd ended up trying to swim to the centre of the tank, figuring the red weed had to put down some kind of roots in the shallow part, but his guess had turned out to be wrong.

Something was tugging on his boot. He looked down, and saw that the red threads were already climbing out of the water, forming a slimy network over the leather.

He kicked around in the water, tried to keep his balance and scrape it off with the opposite heel, but it wasn't having it. Now it was on both boots! He pulled them off and threw them out into the warm water. It was no good. His naked feet were slipping on the spiky bulbs of the weed's roots.

'Oh,' he said, appalled to hear the tremor in his voice. 'Oh, the hell with it.'

He let go and let himself fall face-first into the water.

In seconds the red threads were winding themselves around his limbs. A mass of them jerked his head above the surface, letting him grab a deep breath before shoving him under again, where they meshed themselves over his face and forced themselves inside.

Even though he knew what was happening, he couldn't help panicking and thrashing, clawing back towards the surface. Thick sheets of crimson seaweed shot up from the ocean floor to wrap themselves around him. The threads punched their way down his throat, seizing control of his spasming lungs.

It ended just as it did the first two times. He bobbed tautly in the hot dark ocean, mummified in heavy fronds, drowning, drowning.

Judy's War
Rachael Redhead

Judy had not settled into life as a twenty-something at all well. Her teenage years as a goth hench-wench had been exciting with all the guns, the running, the bank jobs, those three assassinations and a running dual with a genetically augmented human known as Steele. Now living on her own (with her natural yucky brown hair colour) in a terraced house in suburbia she felt that there was something lacking from her life. To put it mildly she was used to a certain level of excitement and adventure in her life, the lack of which left her feeling bored and upset. There were invading Jalaxian soldiers marching down her street again. And what was worse, they weren't even remotely cute, so it wasn't worth her while getting arrested and interrogated by one of them.

Her strip-search fantasies died only half-begun. She closed her bedroom window and wondered who she could complain to about this whole situation. And her general lack of a boyfriend. Not that she needed one, but they were nice to have around, when there were chores to be done and she was feeling lazy. (And the less said about the eight-legged creature in the bath last week the better.)

'I hate everything and everyone.'

Trudiode, the pretty fembot (everyone she knew agreed that she was the pretty one), looked out at the invading army and then back at her comic book of human history. 'I didn't know this planet was due for an invasion today. We just had one on Saturday.'

Violet (who could be kindly described as a pile of spare parts with pointy fake hair in a home-made dress) couldn't shrug, as she hadn't been built with shoulders that shrugged, so she sighed instead. 'I bet none of those invaders get an ASBO. I got another one just last week and I was helping someone.'

Trudiode let the net curtain fall back into place, before she got tangled up in it like she did yesterday. She had an idea and said it to her wife before she forgot it. 'Maybe we could go on holiday?'

Violet nodded her general approval of holidays. 'Not the beach again. You know you're not waterproof, and that sand stuff gets everywhere. We were still finding it in Kat's systems a week later.'

On cue, Kat stalked into the room, using a fishing pole with a

piece of cheese on the end of it, in her attempt to catch the mousie that she'd been programmed to find. 'Meow, purr, meow.'

Enigma Tree was in her Woodstock phase, she decided, as she had decorated her home to be an exact duplicate of one she'd seen in the late sixties in a little time jaunt that had not ended well for her old cardigan but had allowed her to snog a very famous guitarist and record backing vocals on one of his records. She paused for a moment and then wondered why the planet's history tasted different, again. She now worried that her 'free love and peace' skirt didn't go with reality as it was now, before it changed again.

Over and over it was flickering, like two naughty people fighting over a TV remote control. She wasn't about to get involved in any of that stuff again.

She finally had a proper boyfriend to look after and protect, so there was only one thing for it: she dragged his duct-taped body into her magic wardrobe and left the planet until it got its past, present and future sorted out.

(It's not easy to keep someone tied up when they're simultaneously in three different timelines, but temporal knots were her speciality in the Homeworld Girl Guides.)

'Let go of me!' Judy exclaimed loudly as two ugly, brutish guards dragged her out of her home. 'I've done nothing. Get your hands off me!' She struggled and complained, but they had tight hold of her upper arms - which meant she was going nowhere and she'd probably have bruises there in the morning. 'I'm innocent of everything! Okay, so there was that time we held up that bank on Rigel IV, but it was for a laugh and we returned most of the money afterwards.'

'Silence, anomaly.'

'Do not speak.'

'Where are you taking me?' Judy feared the worst. This was going to be worse than the time she and her weird neighbour ended up in that strange prison where they were forced into some bizarre and artificial cliché of womanhood. Or worse, it could be like that time that she, Trudiode and Enigma took the secret time-train (located in Paris, of all places) into the future.

'All anomalies must be questioned and purged.'

'I'm not an anomaly - you're the anomaly!' Judy tried to escape again but she was going nowhere fast. A neat summation of her teenage years.

'This unit is contemporised with this version of reality.'

'What does that even mean?' Judy asked. 'You're just making up words now, aren't you?'

'You have travelled outside your own time stream.'

'Oh, that. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone that. Yardley said people might come asking questions about me travelling with him. He said I had to keep my mouth shut, or they might unelect him king or something.'

Trudiode didn't like the way the strange people just walked into her home while she was playing the potato game with her daughter-droid. 'Get behind me, now.'

'All anomalies must be questioned and then disposed of.'

'Maybe you'll be the one we dispose of,' Violet retorted. 'Now get away from the missus.'

'You are all from another world. Another version of history. The changes to this planet have not affected you; and thus you are anomalies.'

'Oh that.' Violet said. 'We're just here for Robonda's education. I don't actually like humans very much.'

'I do.' Trudiode smiled. 'Some humans are my best friends, such as Judy and Claire. Of course, Enigma isn't human either, but I like her all the same, and we often go off having great adventures together, like that time we went on that train into the future and I solved a murder before it happened, after knowing already that it was going to occur. I got a medal for that, and a free plastic paperweight - do you want to see it?'

'You will all come with me for processing.'

Violet was amazed how easily they disarmed her, then they removed her arms and hands from her third favourite flame thrower and then returned said arms to her but without said flame thrower. 'I suppose we could do with a holiday.'

'Yay.' Robonda cheered. 'Me like holidays!'

'Just you.' The Seeker pointed at Trudiode, and the Jalaxian soldiers separated her from her family, to the distress of every member of it.

Helen Greyridge felt odd as she was scanned by a strange device; memories of the past were dragged up in her mind all of a sudden. Of a strange little man with an umbrella, some sort of evil renegade.

She screamed as she was branded with a T on her left arm and her clothes were dissolved away by a defabricator. Then she was dressed in a pink boiler suit with a number, 4278, on it and her name erased from her mind and replaced with the identity 4278. 4278 was forced into the containment area where she and the hundreds of other confirmed temporal anomalies were to be confined for the good of the Jalaxian Empire.

Judy was compiling a list in her head. She'd tried keeping it verbally, but the idiots in uniform kept zapping her with shock sticks until she shut up. That was item #43 on her list of complaints against her captors. Currently she was up to item #106: they wouldn't let her sit with her legs crossed.

Anyone who was anybody knew that it was just way more comfortable to sit in the back of an alien transport pod with your legs crossed. It wasn't the seventeen hundreds or the planet Gweuk, both of which had a terminal ban on women sitting with their legs crossed, which was so unfair, and she'd complained to Yardley about it at the time, not that he'd agreed with her position all that much, well he wouldn't would he, being able to sit comfortably with his legs crossed like a normal person.

'When we get to the camp, you will be processed to determine your level of threat.'

Judy ignored the guard and secretly wished that this was all a horrible dream. Had she had that cheese for her supper last night?

'The prisoner will respond.'

Judy looked at the alien soldier. 'Sorry, I was obeying your order not to talk, which I've now disobeyed because I'm following your order to talk. Please make up your mind as to what you want me to do. I've got nothing else to do today, so I can wait while you make up your mind.'

She was zapped by the guards again and managed to hold onto the control of her bladder, this time. 'I'll be making a full complaint about this, you know. You can't just kidnap innocent women out of their homes, stuff them into the back of a transport pod, and then zap them with shock sticks for talking and then zap them for not talking. It's in the rules of the Spiral Politic - Yardley told me so, while he was pointing out each and every rule he'd broken himself.'

'Be silent!'

'Whatever.' Judy sighed and waited to be zapped again. She did

not have long to wait.

'I miss Violet.' Trudiode frowned, which was something she rarely did as she was normally a very happy robot. 'I miss Kat too.' She felt sad in her processor and created a gloomy.exe file to help express her inner feelings. 'I miss Robonda most of all.' Her beloved daughter-droid was everything to her, a small and totally dependent bundle of fun who loved to play with toys and games just as much as her Mummies did.

Violet could process the situation, and Kat wouldn't mind too much while Violet was there to feed her. Robonda, however, wouldn't be able to understand or process the shock, even with one of her Mummies to help her. Trudiode started to cry, and used the hem of a nearby Jalaxian guard's dress to wipe her oily tears away. 'Thanks.'

'Let go of my dress. Then stand in the processing area.'

'I'm Trudiode.' Trudiode smiled as she tried to make friends with the guard.

'Please don't talk,' the guard said to the feminine robot. 'Stand still while you are being scanned.'

Trudiode had started hopping out of fear and quickly stopped. 'Can I talk? I like talking when I'm nervous. My wife likes to smoke cigarettes when she gets anxious, although since we got Robonda she's had to go outside if she wants to have a ciggy. She keeps saying she's going to build herself a smoking pod but it never happens.'

'Please stop talking,' the guard said. 'Save your confession for the inquisitor.'

'What confession?' Trudiode was puzzled. 'Unless you mean my secret love of hopscotch. Do you like hopscotch?'

'Just go on through to the confinement sector.' The guard had detected unacceptably high levels of multiple temporal anomalies in the prisoner and so she'd have to be questioned and, most likely, destroyed, for the glory of the Jalaxian Empire.

Violet was at a loss at how to cope, so she resorted to doing what she liked best: cleaning things. 'This floor needs a good clean.'

'Me distressed!' Robonda tried to make her distress known to her remaining Mummy. 'Me want comfort, reassurance and sweeties!' Even in her shock and upset she couldn't resist the chance to get

some nice sweeties from her Mummy.

'Meow.' Kat tried her best to help. 'Purr, purr.'

Violet knew what would help everyone feel better. 'Let's tidy the house up, it'll be fun.'

'Me have homework.' Robonda made a dash for her bedroom.

'Purr,' Kat said before climbing into her cardboard box and off-lining for a couple of hours.

'More fun for me.' Violet's denial circuit was working overtime and had requested more runtime from her CPU.

'Is this the queue of the complaints department?' Judy asked the large man in the riot gear, not really expecting an answer. 'Seriously, they drag me out my home without an invitation, lock me in a truck without an arrest warrant, and now I'm here and I know for certain I didn't make a hotel reservation. Is this Derren Brown? It is that thing, isn't it, where they make people think they've been made queen of the planet, or a spy.'

'Put your hand on the scanner.'

'Which hand?' Judy saw the mean bully in a uniform reach for his shock stick and quickly she put her left hand on the scanner. 'I hope you're happy being a little cop in a big fascist machine, oppressing innocent women just because that's how you're wrong in the head.'

'Advance through to the questioning department.'

'Good, because I have a lot of questions to put to whomever is in charge of this right wing ego trip.' Judy felt that she had the moral high ground. Just like the time that store detective had planted a vase in her handbag, just so that he could ask her out on a date.

'Sod this for a lark.' Claire pushed one of the guards out of the way and made a run for it. 'Why can’t a girl get rescued by her mysterious colour-blind alien friend when she needs him?' She had gotten quite a way towards the exit - she’d had years and years to practice her running skills, after all. However, a mysterious figure shot her and didn’t so much change her mind as her past. She was now always a loyal human member of the Jalaxian Empire and she admired her reflection. The mirrored windows showed her just how smart she looked in her guard’s uniform.

From the comfort of her antique armchair, which she bought yesterday, Enigma monitored the strange occurrences on her

adopted home planet.

The readings were very strange: there were three competing time lines, the original one in which she bought a blue top yesterday, a second one in which she purchased a yellow top, and the third one in which she didn't get herself a top but rather a nice skirt. She was almost tempted to let that reality win, but on the whole she'd rather have her timeline remain what she was comfortable with. After all, she wasn't one of those sorts of time meddlers with their silly masks and made up rituals.

She'd once met Cousin Jeff…James…Jimmy? It had all been a terrible affair and she'd been forced to correct all three mistakes in his time line, purely because he'd annoyed her… well, she was still technically in House Arpexia, and she had some standards to maintain.

She could probably cobble together something from her spare parts tin to sort this whole changing histories business, but without knowing the reason for the changes it might lead to more happening, and that would be a most inelegant solution.

She resolved to sort things out, eventually… possibly after a nice long beach holiday on her favourite resort planet. After all, it was bikini season there, and she so liked to have a nice long holiday after coming into contact with the past she was sloughing away.

'What is your name?'

'Screw you!' Judy said sharply to the fascist who was wearing a fascist uniform and fascist clicky-heeled boots.

'You will co-operate or it will go badly for you.'

'Like how? You'll break into my house and drag me out of it in handcuffs? You'll shove me in a van and lock me in a jail without any cause or provocation? Get over yourself, lady! This is where your nasty little right wing ego trip ends. In my time I've been menaced by, and run away from, far crazier people than you.'

'What is your name?'

'What's your name?'

'My name is Sally.'

'Hello, pleased to meet you Sally, how are you feeling today? Isn't the weather good for this time of year? I'm Judy Collins and you have no idea how pissed off I am today.'

Sally pressed some buttons on her computer. 'It says here you left school and did nothing for five years before you got a job at Cost-

Buster Supermarket.'

'I was travelling, with a guy, really famous and scary. Wherever we went they knew him and they tried to arrest us. I spent three weeks in jail on Altos III for being his friend. I did another week in a cell in Longhorn for alleged cattle rustling, but they never proved a thing. I also did a couple of weeks in the worst prison in the galaxy - you won't believe some of the people I met there. Do you know Haana? What about Violet? She likes to mop floors now.'

'Your attempts to obfuscate the truth by talking gibberish will not go unpunished.'

Judy felt the zap and burn of the shock collar, but luckily she'd already been made to go to the loo by it three times today and there was nothing more in there to come out of her just now. 'You don't know me, so I'll let that one go. I never lie, I always complain – about everything - and I compensate for my bad luck by getting drunk on cheap Malibu and having sex with random guys who chat me up down the local nightclub.'

'I think we'll have to use the mind probe.'

'No.' Judy tried to suppress a laugh because she'd told the silly woman the truth. 'Not the mind probe!'

'Hello.' Trudiode waved as a new person to make friends with entered the room. 'I'm called Trudiode.'

'Yes, we have your details on record.'

'Do you want to play the guessing game? You try to guess something about me and I'll tell you if it's true or not.'

The questioner was not going to fall for this; it had put her predecessor into the psychiatric care cycle. 'Why don't we just load up your CPU details?'

'If you must, but I love guessing games.' Trudiode pouted as self-running software was activated when her CPU details were requested - a sort of self-defence mode with extra memory files to remind her of who she also was.

'Now then, who are you?'

'I am will have going to have been Cousin Carnival of the House Paradox, currently known as Faction Paradox in this temporal junction of the Spiral Politic.'

'When were you built?'

'Seven hundred years from now, twenty-two years ago.'

'I'm confused.'

'Good.' Trudiode smiled and watched as her shadow danced on the wall and shook her shadow-bonded maracas. Being a robot of peace she'd refused to let them give her a weapon of any sort. 'I am from your future. I am what is known as a time traveller. Have you seen that film with that naughty robot who tries to kill that human but the nice robot saves his human friend? I'm a bit like that, although I am prettier.'

Judy screamed as the mind probe ripped memories out of her head and replayed them on a mediocre normal definition telly.

She was seventeen and an angry teenager out to take on the world single handed.

She met Yardley James, a tall confident man with a real beard.

She took part in her first bank job - Yardley needed the money to buy something called yellowcake.

She met Violet in that jail.

She snogged that guy, whose name she never did find out, at the first ever Glastonbury festival.

Yardley had to drop her off home after finding out some terrible truth about the history of the universe. Apparently he had to go home and warn his people about some sort of enemy.

Judy cried out with relief as the pain ended and her torturer made some notes.

Someone knocked four times on the door of her time ship. Enigma opened it cautiously in case they were from a charity wanting her bank details. 'Hello? Oh, it's you Violet.'

'I'm very worried,' Violet said as she entered the strange wardrobe, which was a lot bigger on the inside than it should be - like that strange temple in the Pacific ocean she'd found once when she was on that submarine.

'Me want sweeties.' Robonda tugged on her favourite school teacher's skirt. 'Me been good droid for Mummy.'

'That's good to hear.' Enigma sat the little robot on her knee and let her explore the contents of her handbag.

'Trudiode's been arrested.' Violet told Enigma everything - even about that misunderstanding with that shop about those shoes.

Judy felt her mind slowly slipping away as it became very hard to concentrate on anything and she just wanted to laugh out loud at

nothing which was remotely funny at all. Her head was on fire and images of Yardley danced around in front of her eyes even when they were closed. 'I am the War King of Homeworld. I am speaking through the telepathic connection which I share with my former travelling cohort. Judy Collins is under my protection. Release her at once, or you will never have been born to arrest and imprison her. She has committed no crimes yet on her own planet that deserve this treatment. I grant her a full pardon.'

The guard shrugged. 'If I wasn't born then I can't be writing this down now.'

The replacement guard smiled. 'If I wasn't born then I can't be writing this down now.'

The third guard smiled. 'If I wasn't born then I can't be writing this down now.'

Judy felt better in herself already,

'Let's try a rumba.' Trudiode stopped her one robot shadow puppet theatre as her faction.exe file stopped running and she returned to her default settings. 'What were we talking about again?'

The cell door opened and Violet rushed inside and hugged her wife. 'We're here to rescue you.'

'It's me that needs saving,' the guard said to the two newcomers. 'She kept breaking the laws of physics.'

Enigma used her taser to put the guard out of her misery. 'One down, three to go. Luckily I had the good sense to allow Violet to put tracking devices on all of us.'

Violet looked at the hand-held device she was holding in her hand. 'I think Claire's next door, although her signal is very strange - she reads like a guard.'

Enigma opened the door and found her neighbour Claire taking off her guard's uniform. 'She is a guard.' She pushed her mind into that of her friend, and saw the damage that had been done to her on a temporal level. 'She's got a whole new past now. Luckily for her, though, I can liberate her from the winning side and let her join us.'

'We're the losers!' Trudiode exclaimed with contentment.

'In fact, I think I can make some improvements. Claire was so bored and lonely in her old life, but if she's my housemate we can have all sorts of fun together - and she gets on well with my boyfriend, I can introduce her to his sister.'

Violet liked this idea a lot. 'That's good. We want a nice couple to

go on double dates with to social occasions.'

'Judy's also been captured.' Claire explained everything to her housemate. 'I think they're going to execute her, although for some reason she has a different guard every time I remember.'

The cell door exploded inwards in a cool cinematic slow motion effect - at least, that's how Judy would remember it afterwards. At the time it was a lot more intense and swear-y as Enigma dealt with the guard by standing on his neck. (Shouldn't she have had a female guard in the cell with her? She was sure she should complain to someone about that.)

Suddenly a hologram of Yardley appeared in the room, being emitted from Violet's eyes. 'I have taken control of this droid to say thank you for rescuing my friend. I place her care and responsibility with you, Enigma.'

'How do you know Enigma?' Judy asked her hologrammatic best friend.

'It's complicated.' Yardley replied, disconnected the control line and gave the robot control of herself again.

'Let's escape,' Trudiode said, happy that she could contribute an idea to the escape committee. She'd have to look up the words *contribute* and *committee* later though.

'Good idea.' Violet was bored with the whole prison thing - though if she could meet up with her friend Haana again that would be good. 'Come along, Claire, you can hold my hand.'

'I'm holding Judy's hand.' Trudiode said to everyone else before the game of 'running down corridors' started.

It was decided that the seekers were a success, as on the whole they eradicated a great number of problems from the current timeline. Such people had a history of overcoming great and terrible events as many of them had once been trained by the nefarious, notorious, and nebulous individual known only as the Evil Renegade.

The piles of bodies might have posed a significant PR problem, but luckily someone had the idea of feeding them to a recently discovered carnivorous plant.

Enigma shook her head after she'd hacked into the control centre in charge of the current timeline's ruling elite. She countermanded a few orders here and there but by and large things were off-kilter

and in need of some good meddling. Then the whole of the planet's history changed…

Judy looked out of her bedroom window to see strange flying saucers landing in the distance. 'I'm going back to bed.'

'Hello.' Haana said with a smile, and kissed Judy.

Playing For Time V

Tefen laughs, sprawling in the carpet. 'What the hell was that?'

'A dangerous mistake,' says Triphis, somberly.

It takes Tefen longer than it should to swallow his laughter. Triphis stretches out, eyes fixed on the chronomasticon. 'You may think that world was full of fun,' she says, 'but it was also the first with any Faction presence.'

He sits up. 'You're right, of course.'

'Next time, we'll process any anomalies here. Sending my personal staff out to do the clean-up is dangerous. If someone notices, if they decide there's a problem with what we're doing...' But there is a smile sneaking its way onto her mouth. 'On the other hand, it is amusing, watching them get tangled up in it with no way of knowing what's going on.'

'Of course! They can't detect where the changes are coming from,' says Tefen.

'Still, they're clever in ways you might not think it's possible to be clever,' says Triphis. 'Some of them may even try to use our experiment as cover for their own.'

'You don't think we should pause for a while?'

'In any case they can't breach the ship.' The lights of the sphere sparkle in her eyes. 'While our next game is in play, I want you to have a little poke around inside our toy – looking beyond the catalogue of tipping points of time.' He meets her gaze and doesn't blink. 'Does it have any safety features built in? Can it detect interference? Can it detect detection of itself? If there's anything in there, I want to know.'

He cushions his head on his arms in a way he knows she thinks is cute. 'I'm a bit worried that getting deeper into it might be dangerous,' he says.

She laughs. 'Well, why do you think I'm asking you to do it!'

For a long time the only thing he could think about was the red weed withdrawing its threads from his lungs, done with such slow delicacy, so much care not to damage the tissue, that it takes more than an hour. Then the scraping pain of breathing as he bobbed in the shallows, the fronds crushingly tight around his chest, forcing the warm air in and out, in and out, until he was able to breathe on

his own. He paid no attention when the medical staff fished him out of the tank with a boathook, still gasping as though he'd sprinted half a mile, and took him to the medical bay where, to his great relief, they rendered him unconscious.

He woke in his own little bubble.

He felt like a million dollars. It wasn't just that, thank God, the nightmare was over. The seaweed had given him what Chrys once called a full-body manicure; everything had been repaired, rejuvenated. He gave himself a quick once-over in the full-length mirror, then took a more careful look at his face. He sagged a little in relief. She could've given him a different nose, or a third eye, or breasts, but nothing was obviously different.

Or had something changed, and his memory had been changed too, so he'd never even know?

It was still startling, frightening, sometimes, to see his changed body, the new shape of his shoulders and legs, to not quite be able to remember how he used to look. It still scared him, sometimes, to hear the words she wants to hear coming out of his mouth. Like all of her harem he had been altered through force and seduction to a foreign pattern, and he tried to match that pattern to earn her kindness. Her mandatory, revokable kindness.

Is this what she would do to the universe, if she ever got complete control of the ship? He'd always imagined its original owners as conquerors – setting out from their cosmos in their unstoppable boat, hoarding treasure as they chose, cutting and stitching countless species and cultures into their own image. Was that the pearl Triphis was looking for? To see her own face everywhere she looked?

Tefen's room was sparely furnished and scrupulously clean, with just a couple of bookshelves for what Chrys and Quiver called his 'garbage collection', the handful of artefacts Triphis had let him examine. Most of the space was taken up by long racks of clothes. He had his pick of suits and shirts, tight pants and dashikis – all of them chosen for him by Triphis, of course. He showered and threw on a jalabiya. Then, with a pair of plastic tweezers and a lot of care, he removed the stripped-down translator bud pushed deep inside his ear canal. When it was out he ground it under his heel until there was no evidence left.

It hadn't taken much to get Chrys and Quiver to agree to tell Triphis what he wanted her to hear. Hell, they'd probably have

done it anyway.

The seaweed was a surprisingly sophisticated telepath, once it got its matter inside the spaces of your skull, close enough to your brain to exchange signals with it. They didn't talk in words, but ideas, images, slowly mediated and resolved by the translator.

The red weed was a prisoner too. It was stolen from a warm little pond on a dimly lit world circling one of the galaxy's halo stars, long dead. Tefen had a momentary, dizzying impression, running across his entire body, of millions upon millions of years, time spinning past meaninglessly – the joy, the joy that someone was communicating with it at long last!

Triphis was not the first to make use of the ship; the weed was here when she arrived. It was well-cared for. But it remembered the open skies of its home planet. And it regretted the hurt it caused. It wanted him to know it had no choice.

That's fine, he told it. Just tell me that there's a way out.

Each response took minutes to form inside his skull, minutes measured by the excruciating clenching of his throat around tough plant tissue. At last: Don't you have the ship's manual?

No. I think Triphis has been looking for it ever since she took control of the ship.

Then you'll have to talk to the original crew, the weed told him.

How?!

They're still here. They're still on board.

What!

Of course. They still have their round to complete.

Not a warship, not a pirate ship - Are you telling me this is a mail ship?!

That was its purpose before Triphis secured it. It carried packages, and a small crew of messengers.

The weed put a series of images into his head. The pictures came tumbling back, now, like a nightmare suddenly remembered.

'Of course,' he murmured. 'Of course. Who else?'

Red Rover Red Rover
Q

Ellie

Okay. 'Rude awakening'; definition of.

What's your worst one? I guarantee I can top it. Alarm going off? Cat stepping on your face? Fire drill in the middle of the night?

Try landing in a freezing mud puddle. Naked.

When I could breathe again I got to my feet. The field wasn't actually flooded today, just soggy... which was worse, really, because at least rainwater's sort of clean. I swore a little bit to get my breath back, then hopped over to the edge of the field and hoped I could reach my clothes stash before I got hypothermia.

It feels like each Shift is getting harder. Or maybe I'm just getting older; I don't know. The constant back-and-forth really takes it out of you: hot/cold; hot/cold; desert/swamp; summer/winter; lather, rinse, repeat. After a while your immune system just gives up and sticks you with a cold no matter which world you're in.

Anyway, I made it to my stash. And my rule is, any day that your clothes aren't ruined or stolen is a good day. So, today was a good day. By law. I weighed my options while I got dressed: it was three miles to town, but the sky said it was only early morning. The charity pits didn't open till eleven or twelve. So, if I had some food at a shelter first, I could get stash-replacement clothes right after.

Yeah. I know. My life is so glamorous.

Now, most people would be grumpy about waking up naked in freezing mud and then walking three miles before breakfast. And I would be one of those people. So, to keep from being permanently pissed off, I try to come up with little distractions to make the walk go faster. Like my Floodtown Saga. One of the trails goes through an abandoned neighbourhood, and I like to make up stories about the people who might've lived there. For example, that reed shack with the caved-in roof? It belonged to an old Korean couple. Married 53 years. They ran a roller skating rink and went to a different theme park each year for their anniversary. (Yes, I know. Theme parks and skating rinks are like unicorns over here: people will send you to the looney bin if you say you've ever seen one. But

it's my story; I can tell it like I want to.) See that sad-looking tree-hut by the thorngrove? The woman who lived there won the lottery. No one knew it till she disappeared to travel the world and left a fortune to her favourite animal charity. That red bamboo longhouse with the rope-swing housed a lesbian couple who were trying to get pregnant before the floods came.

Cheerful, right? But it passes the time. Anyway, the Floodtown Saga would have to wait today. Halfway to town, I noticed the sky darkening off to my left: green clouds deepening to black; edged by little crackles of blue lightning. A Hive was moving in. A big one, too... probably the Staurozoa Cluster. Or the Leonidas. Either way, I wanted no part of the nasty crud its wasterain might give me, so I quickened my pace to try and beat it into town.

Now, running with moss bags on your feet really isn't a good idea. And I admit, I did lose some time by looking up every few steps, hoping I'd catch a lucky glimpse of the Hive's inner structure. In spite of all the damage they've done, I've always been kind of fascinated by the Medusae. Is that weird? Probably. But come on: total mystery species that no one's ever seen? Well... no one *except* one clinically insane glider-pilot who described them as 'jellyfish made of vapour'? And with bodies lighter than water molecules, they've managed to conquer an entire planet. How could anyone *not* want to study that?

Anyway, I made it to the city bridgeways in good time, and watched the town appear as I crested the rise: the terraced bamboo flats with their rainbow of glazed-algae roofs... the long-hut chambers and stilted reed temples... the wood-planked footpaths and elevated outhouses... not magnificent, by any means. But for a species under siege? Not bad.

I called it New Atlantis.

I'd just found the road to the nearest day shelter when I heard a commotion. The constant flooding here means a lot of lost habitat, and the local wildlife gets forced into town to try to live off our garbage. Sometimes people set traps near the waste dumps – and yeah, people need to eat and stuff, believe me, I get that – but sometimes they'll beat or torture whatever they catch just for fun before killing it.

Yeah. Not in the mood to put up with that today.

As I got closer, though, I saw the source of the ruckus: a gang of kids at the mouth of an alley. And it wasn't an animal they were

tormenting. It was a man. A naked man. Apart from his clothing deficiency, he was pretty unremarkable: pale white guy, average size and build, sandy blond hair and stubble... and a farmer's tan.

Oh. Now that *was* interesting.

He had a farmer's tan. In a city where it always rains. Not the all-over job you get from tanning sheets; the clear, bold tan-lines you get from wearing clothes out in the sun.

The hot desert sun.

He was a Rover. Just like me.

Joe

This is why I don't normally drink.

I'd only had two pints. That was all I could afford. I'd drunk them slowly, too, because I had to make them last. As long as you pay for your drink, and maybe some beans and flatbread, the barkeeps let you stay inside for as long as you like. But I almost never have the money to do that, and it showed: my tolerance was gone. Two weak cactus ales were enough to make me sleep through a Flip.

The giggling woke me up. I groaned and rolled over, and that's when I saw my audience: five kids and two adults, standing at the mouth of the alley. Blocking my only exit.

I got up and tried to cover myself. 'Um. Hello. One of you couldn't hand me an empty bin bag, or something, could you?'

Nobody moved. One little girl pointed and giggled. 'I saw his *thing!'*

Okay. I've woken up in worse situations. But if someone had sent for a cop, I was in real trouble. I'd already been arrested here twice for public nudity. The first time, a Flip hit right as they were leading me to the holding cell. The second time, the arresting officer said if I tried to give them the slip again I'd be sorry. Then two hours later I Flipped again and vanished from the jailhut.

I turned to the adults. 'Please, could you... it's not what it... please, could someone just... ?'

Nobody moved. Everyone just stood there smirking. Then I heard a voice.

'Johnny? Johnny! Oh my god, I've been looking all over for you!' A skinny woman with frizzy brown hair pushed through the crowd. 'I told you those clubhouse boys were losers, but did you listen? I suppose they think this is some kind of big initiation joke?'

I'd never seen her before. But she was holding out an empty moss

bag, so I decided I could pretend to be her long-lost Aunt Marge if it meant she was going to help me.

'Thanks... sis,' I ventured.

'Dad's gonna kill you, you know,' she nodded, playing along. 'Okay, folks, show's over. Go mind your business. Show some class, for god's sake.'

The crowd broke up. 'Thanks.'

'Don't mention it.' She was about my age, and rustled when she moved because of all the moss bags patching her raincoat. I wondered if that's where she'd gotten the bag she just handed me.

'I owe you one,' I said, tying it around me like a slippery green nappy.

'No problem,' she said. 'Hey, it's hard enough jumping naked from a desert to a swamp without a crowd of pervy gawkers showing up, eh?'

I chuckled and nodded... and then her words sank in. Desert to a swamp. She *knew.* The police had finally found me.

I ran.

'Wait!'

I raced down the main road, ignoring the stares and the catcalls. As I turned down another alley I realised my moss bag was slipping, and tried to hold it up – which is hard to do when you're running – and then heard a crash from behind me.

Garbage littered the alley. The woman had run into a bin. It looked like she'd hurt herself, too: she was rocking back forth, holding her leg and swearing. Which was kind of impressive. She knew a lot of good words.

I started to think she might not be with the police.

'Are you, um. You okay?' The bag had slipped off completely now. All I could do was try to hold it up to cover my modesty.

'What does it look like?!' The woman rubbed her shin, and now I could see blood beneath the moss bags. I winced.

'You want some help with that?'

'What, from a naked guy who bolts like a rabbit when you say two words to him?'

Ouch. 'I... thought you were the police.'

She grabbed an empty beer box and sent it spinning past my ear. 'What kind of police wear moss bags for raincoats, you idiot?!'

I ducked. Apologetically. '... undercover ones?'

She didn't answer. She didn't get up, either, so I stepped closer. 'I,

um. Used to do first aid. I could take a look at that. If you like.'

There was doubt in her eyes. I didn't blame her... any offer from a naked man probably shouldn't be trusted. But then she seemed to decide something, and climbed her way up the wall until she was standing on her good leg.

'First, you put some clothes on. Then we can go to a shelter and look at my leg. Oh, and there's a Hive moving in, so we'd better hurry.' She narrowed her eyes. 'You do have a stash, right? ... clothes? That you hide for when you Shift?'

'Oh. Yes. Well. I hope so. Sometimes they get stolen. Or get wet. Or... um. Yeah. Never mind. Yes.'

'Okay. So, sometime today, then?'

It was the most uncomfortable ten minutes of my life. If I went too fast, I'd leave her limping behind me, but if I went too slow, the Hive would catch us out in the open, and she'd have to suffer the uninspiring view of my bare arse for one second longer than she had to.

When we finally arrived at my stash, as she called it, I paused. 'Could you just... turn your back, please?'

I suppose it was kind of silly. At this point, I literally had nothing left to hide from her. But I wanted privacy for this. It was hard to explain why, but I just didn't want her to see me getting dressed.

Her mouth twitched. But she gave a little shrug – *okay, why not?* – and turned around. When she turned back again and saw me with clothes on for the first time, she frowned.

'... what?'

'Don't you have a raincoat? Or a towel?'

'Oh.' My clothes were kind of sticking to me. I hadn't taken the time to dry off before putting them on. 'No.'

'Well, they have stacks of them in the charity pits. You really ought to get one. You're allowed one each with your bag of clothes.'

'Ah.' For some reason, the men's handout places – they were all men- or women-only – were only open one day a month, which wasn't today. Also, you didn't pick and choose so much as get handed a grab bag, then nod and say thank you and take what you were given. But I wasn't sure how to say all that without sounding like I was arguing. So I just said, 'Okay.'

A doubtful look crossed her face. I got the feeling I wasn't making a very good impression, but if there's some magic way to look cool and clever after a woman's just spent the last ten minutes staring at

your bare backside, I would really like to know what it is. Finally she said, 'Come on. Shelter's four blocks off. If we hurry we can beat the Hive there.'

And we did. There were already people queuing outside when we arrived.

'Excuse me.' Nobody moved. 'Excuse me, she's hurt. Has anyone got a first aid kit?' Nobody even looked round. Which is pretty par for the course whenever I speak up, but this time it made me angry. There was a woman hurt. Someone should *care*.

'Hey!' That got everyone's attention. 'We've got an injured woman here. Somebody pull your head out and help her.'

Somebody did. A worker arrived with a medic kit and waved us inside. We got as far as the door when a big bloke put his hand out and held me back.

'Not you. We got this.'

I hesitated. There wasn't any reason for me to follow her in, I suppose. The important thing was that her leg got treated. But then she turned around, and for a second, our eyes met.

'... oh, he's with me,' she told them.

The workers looked at each other. You could tell they didn't like it, but the injured lady had said the magic words: *he's with me*. For a moment, in spite of the rain, I felt rather warm.

Once her leg was cleaned and bandaged, we got served breakfast early, before anyone else in the queue.

'Wow. V.I.P. service.' She put her bowl down on the table. 'I should bork my leg up more often; next time there might be pancakes.'

I smiled. 'Feeling better?'

'Not really. Hurts like hell. But that'll pass. So anyway...' She leaned forward, the way you do when you want to share a secret. '... you're a Rover then. Like me. I've never met another one before.'

I swallowed my mouthful of breakfast stew without quite meaning to. No one's face had been that close to mine for ages. Well. Not in a friendly way, at least. I noticed a little bump on her nose that gave it a kind of beaky look. I noticed the dusty brown freckles that looked like they'd been sprinkled on like cinnamon. And I noticed it was now my turn to say something.

'Um... "Rover"?'

'Oh. Right. Sorry. That's what I call us, with the hopping between the worlds.' She sipped her stew. 'Like the playground game. You know... "Red Rover, Red Rover, send so-and-so right over".'

I scoffed. 'Sorry. It's just... I was always rubbish at that game.'

'Oh, me too!' She grinned like I'd just said we had the same birthday. 'I mean, what kind of Darwinian maniac dreamed that one up? Target the small kids and make them feel weak... just be honest and call it bullies-in-training.'

I'd never thought of it that way before. Suddenly all the time I'd spent flat on my back with my arm wrenched half out of its socket almost seemed like something to be proud of. Almost.

'Anyway,' she tore off a strip of rice paste and dunked it in her stew, 'I've got about a million questions. Have you met any other Rovers? Where do you land? Is it always the same place? Are there other worlds you go to or just the same two?'

'I've got a question, first.' I said. 'What's your name? You've seen me naked and I don't even know what to call you.'

Her face did something halfway between a smile and a cringe. It was rather lovely. 'Sorry. Bit rusty at the whole human interaction thing, I guess.' She shook my hand. 'Hello mystery naked man, my name is Ellie. Ellie Green.'

'Really?' The laugh sputtered out before I knew it. 'Sorry, just... my name's Brown. Joe Brown.' I pointed back and forth between us. 'So... Green and Brown. Brown and Green. Blimey. If we ever got married, we'd have to change our name to Hazel.'

Oh my god are you INSANE you've known her less than an hour and you've already said the M word what the hell kind of idiot are you? Stupid, stupid... but hang on wait is she laughing oh thank goodness she's laughing...

'I guess we're just a very colourful pair.' She wiped her mouth on her sleeve, since there were no napkins in sight. 'So anyway. Other Rovers? Other landing sites?'

'Oh. Um. No, no others. Just you. And I always land where you found me. You?'

'Field outside of town. About three miles.'

'Yikes. Must be a haul.'

She shrugged. 'Keeps me fit. In some ways it's good, really. Harder to draw a crowd like you had this morning. In other ways, though...' Something darkened her brow for a moment, but she shook it away. 'Anyway, which is your favourite? Sahara City or New Atlantis? I mean, of course, there are upsides to both, like...' She caught my blank look and did the smile-cringe thing again. 'Ah. That's what I call them... like, here's New Atlantis because it's always flooded,

and there's Sahara City because, well, desert.' She wrinkled her nose, making the freckles there dance. 'Wow. Social skills. Sorry. I guess it's just been a while since I had someone to talk to.' She prodded her stew.

I nudged a chunk of seaweed in my own bowl. 'That's okay. It's been a while since I had someone to talk to me.'

It was a weird thing to smile about. Kind of like finding out someone has the same type of malaria as you: it's horrible, but at least you have something in common. At least someone else understands.

A noise made us look up. Some workers down the hall were unfolding a long table: registration. Sign-ups for beds.

Ellie hopped up on her good leg. 'Uh-oh! Better get a head start. Sometimes the lines get ugly.' She saw me hesitate and stopped. '... What?'

'It's just... I've heard... nah, it's nothing. Bad idea.'

'What is?'

I fidgeted. 'Well, there was this lady in the queue, months ago, complaining that the shelters treat married couples better. Private rooms, better food, the works. Said you don't even need to show proof; just say you're together.'

I knew it was a mistake when I saw her expression. It looked like a flower closing. 'Oh. And you want to pretend... ?'

'Nah, like I said. Bad idea. She was probably just making it up.' I stood up, even though I had about half a bowlful of stew left that I really wanted. 'You go on; I'll sign up in a bit.'

Then I had to turn around and head for the dumping bin just to give her time to escape. *Stupid; stupid.* I'd actually met someone really interesting, someone I had a chance of being able to talk to, and known her for a whole hour before I managed to frighten her away. Well done, Brown.

I dumped out the stew and sighed. Then I turned back to the table... and almost collided with a faceful of freckles.

'See, the thing is,' she said, like we hadn't even stopped talking, 'I can't even remember the last time I had a good meal and a private room. So, even if your grumpy lady was just spinning her wheels, I reckon it's worth a gamble.'

I blinked again. 'Really?'

'Mmm,' she nodded. 'Of course, that's assuming I can trust you. Can I?'

I don't know if you've ever tried to look trustworthy before. Especially when someone's standing there staring right through you. I wanted to say how nice it was just being with her the last few minutes, just talking, like friends, and how insanely stupid I would be to risk losing that. So I said, '... yes.'

'Okay then.'

We were third in line. I was about to give my usual name to the workers when Ellie leaned down and said,

'Hazel. Joe and Ellie Hazel.'

The warm feeling spread all the way up to my ears this time.

It didn't last long, though. After we'd finished signing in, she offered me her hand to shake by the front door. 'Well then, Mr. Hazel. I can honestly say it's been the most memorable morning I've had in rabbits' years.' She was leaving. Of course she was leaving. The Hive had passed while we were eating, and this wasn't a day shelter... we'd have to find somewhere else to go until check-in time. I must have looked as disappointed as I felt, though, because she laughed and said, 'Relax, I'm not going to the moon, just the charity pits. You know... stash replacement? All the good stuff's usually gone in an hour. You should probably go too, right?'

'Oh. Yeah.' I didn't want to tell her that the men's handout places were closed today. So I just shook her hand and said, 'It's been my pleasure, Ms Hazel,' then added, rather weakly, 'see you this evening?'

'Are you kidding? You're the only other Rover I've ever met; you're not getting rid of me *that* easily.' She put her hand on the door... then paused and looked back. 'Don't you disappear on me.'

'Promise,' I said, knowing full well that if a Flip hit before check-in time, neither one of us could fight it any more than we could fly.

Her smile faded a little, like she was thinking the same thing. Then she nodded, turned, and limped out the door.

I spent most of the day raiding clotheslines. It didn't go well. At the end of it I had two handkerchiefs, an apron, and one sock. And a bruise where someone threw a doorstop at me. That evening I sat in the shelter common room pretending to listen to people talk or joke or argue, and tried not to watch the front door.

I'd probably end up at the overflow shelter tonight if she didn't come back. Packed in with the drunks and the mentals and the perverts trying to touch you up or rob you, or both, and I'd spend

the whole night kicking myself for not trying to go with her when I had the chance.

Then something green dropped in my lap.

'There,' said a familiar freckled face, holding a worn moss shelter-bag. 'Now you don't have to go around looking like a drowned rat.'

I stood up. 'Hello. Again.' I picked up the green thing, which turned out to be a towel. It was the ugliest shade of lime-grey I'd ever seen. It was magnificent. 'Thanks.'

'Welcome.' She rummaged in her bag. 'Think I found some stuff your size, too. Do the men's handout places really only open once a month? Seems kind of unfair to me.'

It did to me too, but I didn't say so. 'It's good to see you.'

She smiled, and we went over to the check-in table. I was slightly nervous about this. Clergy were scarce in these parts, which made common law weddings pretty, well, common, so most places didn't ask for proof. But you never knew. Turns out I didn't have to worry, though. The workers only looked at us long enough to give us a number and wave us down a hallway, then went right back to ignoring us.

This part of the shelter was new to me. And I hadn't seen a motel for years, but that's what it reminded me of: a long corridor with matching rooms on either side. The one with our number on it was farthest from the washroom. It was also pretty well furnished: kelp paper to keep out the mould, reed fibre carpets, a table... and a bed. A *real* bed.

One real bed.

'... oh.' It was the most intelligent thing I could think of to say. So I said it again. '... oh. Okay. Um.' Call me stupid, and plenty have, but it honestly never occurred to me that a shelter would have anything other than your basic single-sleeper folding cots, private room or not. *Oh god she thinks you planned this she thinks you knew...* I cleared my throat. 'Well. Obviously, I'll sleep on the floor. I'll take one of the blankets. Or I'll just use the towel...'

She didn't answer. Instead she walked in and circled the bed, frowning at it like a jigsaw puzzle. Finally she said, 'We'll fit. We're both pretty small; we can lie diagonally.' She laid the pillows down in a stripe to mark the dividing line. 'There. That's your side; that's my side; and that's the demilitarized zone.'

My face felt hot. I must have been blushing like mad. 'Really, I don't mind the floor, it's...'

'... not a big deal. We'll manage.' She handed me the moss bag full of clothes. 'Now then. The last bath I had was in a cold puddle, so I'm hitting the washroom before it fills up.' And with that she disappeared down the hallway, leaving me holding the bagful of clothes.

Ellie

I've never been a very spiritual person. Even when I was little, before the Big Shift, we never really went to church or temple or anything like that. So for me, standing in that shower under the hot water is probably the closest I will ever come to a religious experience.

You think I'm kidding? Most shelters only have group showers, with no temperature control or floor mats and water pressure that's mostly an abstract concept. These showers had actual stalls, with latticed reed flooring to keep the heat in... there was even real steam and everything.

The last time I'd had a bath like this was in my parents' house. Back when I was still a human being. I hadn't thought about that time for years, really, and when I realised I was crying a little, I remembered why not. So I didn't think about it any more, and just tried to savour the heat and the steam and the gorgeous warm water for as long as I could.

When I finally went back to the bedroom, my mystery naked man – Joe – was wearing some of the clothes I'd picked out for him. They didn't fit. He looked kind of ridiculous, but he stood up when I walked in like he'd been waiting for my opinion.

'It's, um... unique.'

The smile I was trying to keep off my face jumped over to his. 'Not ready for the boardwalk, then?' he asked.

Probably he meant catwalk, but frankly his outfit suited a boardwalk much better, so I didn't correct him. 'I think the fashion world is safe for now,' I agreed. 'You better hurry, by the way, while there's still some hot water left.'

He stopped at the doorway. 'Thanks. For the clothes. And the towel. It was, um... well. It was very kind.'

I smiled and nodded. 'Go on. Go get wet.' He took his new towel with him, even though they had plenty in the washroom. Like he wanted to make sure I knew he liked it.

So... sleeping arrangements. I decided it would probably be less awkward if we both got into bed at the same time. So I sat and doodled in one of those little religious pamphlets they always leave in shelter bedrooms while I waited for him to come back. When he did, I almost didn't recognise him.

'... what?'

'You shaved.'

'Oh. Yeah. Not good?'

'No; good. Definitely good. Just... different.' I smiled, and he seemed to relax.

And then a silence fell. The moment had arrived: we were both about to get into bed with a total stranger. He shifted his feet. I realised I was chewing my lip and made myself stop. For a few seconds we just stood there... and then I couldn't take it anymore. I ripped a sheaf from the pamphlet I'd been doodling in and crumpled it into a ball.

'Okay. So, when I was a kid, we had this game at summer camp: first night there, we always played Questions to get over the weirdness of sleeping somewhere new for the first time.' I sat on the floor and motioned him to follow, then held up the crumpled scripture-ball in the space between our bent knees.

'If the ball goes towards your right foot, you say something about yourself. Left foot, the other person asks you a question. Ready?' He nodded, and I dropped the ball. It went to his right foot.

'Okay. What should I talk about?'

'Anything. Something interesting about yourself.'

'Interesting? Tall order.'

'Well, you're the only other Rover I've ever met. Trust me, that's interesting.' When he still couldn't think of anything, I gave him a prompt. 'What's something you liked to do before? You know, before The Big Shift?'

'Um.' His brow furrowed. He sucked in his lips. Then... 'Skeeball.' He drew back at my unexpected laughter. 'What? I was good. I won every prize going down at Charlie's Palace.'

'Oh my god, Charlie's Palace! I had every birthday party of my life there.'

'Yeah, me too.'

I paused to sneeze – yep, still had my cold – and Joe blessed me. 'Thanks. And sorry, I didn't mean to laugh. I would never mock a man's skeeball prowess. It's just... kind of amazing to talk to

someone who even remembers what skeeball *was.'*

He looked down and picked at a loose thread on the rug. 'Yeah. It is.'

Another silence fell. One I wasn't sure I was ready to deal with. So I dropped the ball again, and it rolled to his left foot: a question for me.

'Er... I dunno. Hobbies?'

'Astronomy and computers. I hacked the My Little Pixie game when I was eight because I didn't like the ending.'

He grinned. 'Really? Precocious.'

'Yeah. In fact, I was the youngest... um... nah. Doesn't matter.'

'What?'

He really looked interested. That was unexpectedly nice. So I told him, 'I was the youngest-ever Genius, Inc member. Joined when I was thirteen.'

'Seriously? Wow. We've got a real live outlaw here.'

I squirmed. 'Well, not really. It wasn't all hacking government websites. Mostly it was just us having fun. Like putting gay porn on hate groups' webpages. Stuff like that.'

'Ah,' he nodded. 'Well. I am officially impressed.'

'Quite right too,' I agreed, and dropped the ball again. Left foot: a question for him. 'What were you doing right before your First Shift?'

'Um. Feeding scraps to a pregnant cat.'

'Wow. Well that good deed paid off. That cat probably saved your life.'

'How so?'

'Well, she led you outside.' For some reason I've never understood, I always return to the same place whenever I Shift: the empty field about three miles outside of town where I was stargazing when the Big Shift hit. From what he'd told me, Joe did the same. Maybe it's something neurological; like your brain grasping for a reset button. Like a computer rebooting. 'If you think about it, outdoor landing sites are way safer. I mean, just imagine showing up naked in the middle of a crowded restaurant every few days. And what if they remodelled? You know all those people you hear about at building sites; the ones they find crushed to death inside the walls? Well, those must be other Rovers. Someone just put a wall up right where they were trying to land.'

It was a sobering thought. And one which hadn't occurred to him,

by the look on his face. 'Sorry. Kind of a downer there. Quick, ask me a cheerful one next.'

We spent the next hour or so handing the ball back and forth. When we got cold on the floor, we moved up to sit on the bed.

Left foot. 'Alright... biggest fear?'

'Doctors.'

'Ugh. Me too. Sorry I asked.' I shivered and yawned. 'I'm getting under the covers.' He took that as his cue to do the same, and it was still a little awkward, but not nearly as awkward as it would've been an hour ago.

We kept playing.

His turn; left hand. Favourite song? 'Um. The Frog Jam.'

'What?!' If you don't know that song you have lived a blessed life, but just... imagine a frog. A beatboxing frog. A frog beatboxing to techno music. It's just that simple, just that idiotic, and just that impossible to get out of your head.

'Hey now. That song is a classic. Can't beat the classics.'

'However hard you try?'

After a while the ball dropped to the floor. We didn't bother to fetch it. As we got sleepy, the answers got shorter...

'The thing I miss most is checking my webchat page.'

'I miss Saturday morning cartoons.'

... and the questions got darker:

'Why did we start Roving?'

'Will we ever stop?'

'Why us?'

There weren't really answers to those.

Finally, we came to the question that always signalled the end of the game:

'... Joe?'

'Mmmm?'

'You awake?'

'No.'

'Me either. 'Night.'

''Night.'

I was floating. In a beautiful sky, blue like it used to be; not grey or yellow or red. I was soaring through clouds... over and under, left and right, up and down. And I wasn't alone. Someone was with me, their closeness and warmth wrapping me up like a long-sought

welcome-home embrace.

I opened my eyes.

Faint morning light seeped through the window. I remembered where I was then. And I knew who the warmth was coming from.

Joe and I lay pressed together, back to back under the covers. One of the dividing-line pillows lay on the floor. I was still hugging the other one. I laid it aside, careful not to wake Joe, and then slowly... gently... eased myself out of bed. Which almost physically hurt: the soft sheets and warm blankets called me back like a siren song. But the rising panic in my chest was a lot louder.

I told myself I just I needed my morning run. That was true. When you live like I do, keeping yourself fit isn't vanity; it's survival. I also needed to stretch my sore leg. It didn't really hurt much today, but it was weak and stiff from yesterday's injury. Time to limber it up.

I crept outside and sucked in a breath: cold and dry this morning. No rain. For once in forever, it wasn't even misting. Invigorated, I did a few stretches, then hit the platforms running.

I was fine for the first few blocks. Then the thing that really drove me out of bed caught up to me, and by the time I reached the stable yards, I was crying so hard I had to stop to catch my breath.

I hadn't woken up next to someone in a really long time. It didn't feel bad, or threatening. It felt like hiding under the blankets with my brother during a storm. Or my mother reading me to sleep when I was sick. Or having my first real shower in years the night before. It felt like everything I'd lost in the Big Shift: everything I'd learned to live without if I wanted to survive. And it absolutely scared the hell out of me.

By the time I got hold of myself I was already walking again – Rovers are like sharks; always keep moving – and suddenly found myself back at the alley from yesterday. Joe's landing site. He wasn't there, of course. But two soldiers were.

At least that's what they looked like. One held a ladder while the other wired something over a shop door. They'd tried to dress local, but I could see glints of some hard material – armour? – under their clothes. And no one in the wet world or the dry one was well fed enough to grow muscles like that.

I took a step backwards. The soldier holding the ladder stepped forwards. I backed up again and his partner jumped to the ground.

Okay, time to run.

I'd gone about two blocks when another soldier appeared down the

street. You see why I'm glad I run every morning? I ducked into a sidestreet and raced through a grocer's longhut, startling the early morning shoppers. I thought I'd lost the soldiers then, but no, the gaps in the buildings showed them keeping pace with me one street over.

Dammit. I changed direction, then went a block or two and doubled back again. My best bet was to keep them guessing. I dashed past a fisherman's stables into the town market, which was the closest thing this place had to a maze – lots of people; lots of hiding places – and heard the slosh of boots pounding the mud right behind me.

Then I noticed the ringing in my ears. I'd been too busy running to care, but it had slowly built up to a dull roar. The familiar low, grinding hum came with it, surging in waves, and the sick feeling of floating and being crushed at the same time.

I was about to Shift.

The soldiers skidded around the corner. One of them pointed and shouted, but it was too late; they were already fading away, drifting into darkness with the alley and the buildings and the market...

I hit the dirt.

A big puff of it went up my nose. Ugh. Sahara City is dry at the best of times, and one giant dust storm at the worst. Snuffling, I got up and surveyed the damage: a few scrapes and a bump on one elbow. Not terrible. I was more annoyed that I'd Shifted without refilling my clothes stash first: I'd have two sets to replace now, *if* my reserve was still there. Great. Also, two Shifts in one day wasn't unheard of, but it was unusual. They'd been getting a lot closer together lately. It was something I'd meant to talk to Joe about, but hadn't got the chance to yet.

Joe.

He didn't know about the soldiers. Of course, he wouldn't be back at the shelter now; he'd be in his usual landing site here in Sahara City. But I still had to warn him.

Before I could reach my clothes stash, though, I saw the last person I wanted to see in either world: The Creep. I didn't know his name and didn't want to. He was doughy and unshaven with a big-brimmed hat, and even from this distance I could tell he never bathed. I think he must have used one of the roads along the field to get to work or something. And I guess I couldn't blame him for staring – when a naked person suddenly appears in the middle of

nowhere, it tends to get your attention – but each time he'd seen me he never once called out or asked if I needed help. He just stood there gawking.

I gritted my teeth. I didn't have time for this. Dealing with this bozo was the last thing I needed, but I'd have to get rid of him before I found Joe or even my clothes... I didn't want him seeing where I hid them so he could come back later and rob me.

I stood up and faced him, arms held wide.

'Get a good look, loser. This is the only naked woman you'll ever see in your whole disgusting life.' He didn't take the hint. He did look a little startled that I'd spoken, but he stayed right where he was... and *smirked.*

My hands clenched into fists.

Okay. Weapons. The only rocks close by were pebbles, but there was some large deadwood that might look sharp from a distance. I grabbed the scariest-looking piece I could find and took a deep breath, thinking about the old Celtic warriors who used to run naked into battle.

'YaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUUUGGGGGHHHHH!!!'

That did it. Whatever passed for brain cells in the Creep's head must have told him that a crazy naked woman with a dead tree was more trouble than he wanted. I waited until he was almost out of sight to drop the branch. I suppose the old Celtic warriors would have done a victory dance or something at that point, but all I could think of was what I'd do if he came back later with some of his Creep friends the next time I Shifted.

Thankfully, a cough killed that thought. My mighty battle charge had kicked up a good cloud of dust. I waved it away and chewed up some cozgrass for my leg (the bandage fell off with everything else I'd been wearing back in New Atlantis) and the new cuts on my feet (the chaff here was dry and sharp) before finding my clothes and heading for town.

I spent the three-mile walk thinking about the soldiers. Who were they? What were they doing at Joe's landing site? Did they know he was a Rover? Did they know *I* was? Well, if they didn't before, then they sure did now, after watching me disappear into thin air. But how did they know, and where were they from?

I still had more questions than answers when I reached the bridgeways. One thing about both cities, they have weirdly identical layouts: similar streets and buildings, all echoing the town

that was here first... the one that only Joe and I remembered. If cities were people, you'd say they had a family resemblance.

But there were some pretty big differences, too. Here in Sahara City, you saw honeycombed adobe hives instead of bamboo longhuts. Clay pit houses and underground cellars replaced reed shacks and stilted store-rooms. And, more painfully, the drizzling grey fog gave way to a harsh desert glare. Then there were the bridgeways. In New Atlantis, they stretched out over soggy fields and marshes. Here, they spanned the kind of cratered canyons I expect you might find on the moon. Only these weren't formed by meteorites. They were made by the Krykkani, Sahara City's evil underlords: giant lobster-like creatures whose mineral consumption caused the sinkholes and dust storms that made this place a desert. They were elusive as the Medusae, and just as untouchable... they simply collapsed their tunnels on any humans who tried to attack them, so they'd never been researched or studied.

So, you had your pick: giant vapour-jellyfish in one world; or soil-eating lobsters in the other. At least it gave the fight for survival some variety.

Speaking of sinkholes, though, there'd been a new one since I last Shifted. Crowds of people lined the bridgeways, which was unusual, and when I got closer I saw why: the main bridge was gone. A big chunk of ground where it used to be anchored had fallen into the canyon. A few shoddy rope-bridges spanned the chasm as a temporary fix, but none of them looked especially trustworthy.

Well, great. Magnificent. Stupendous. I suppose I should mention I am terrified of heights. The main bridge wasn't so bad, because it had been sturdy and solid and wide enough that you didn't really notice the drop. But a rope bridge...

Joe didn't know about the soldiers. I had to warn him. So I waited my turn at the nearest bridge, summoned what courage I could... and started across.

I inched forwards like a woman on a tightrope. The handrails were shaggy and rough but I gripped them hard anyway, so tight the fibres dug into my palms. People behind me started to grumble. I invited them to jump down and walk across if they were in a hurry. Breezes gusting up from the chasm below made the bridge sway like a log on water, and I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes... *one more step... one more step... just keep moving...*

'Ellie!'

I jumped so badly I almost let go of the rope. Joe stood on another bridge across the canyon from me, headed in the opposite direction, holding the rail with one hand and waving violently with the other.

'Ellie! Over here!'

'I see you!... *I see you!'* I screamed, to make him stop waving before he fell off and killed himself.

For a second we just stared at each other. Then he grinned... and started laughing. Well, it *was* pretty laughable. We were hopeless. How long would we have spent wandering around looking for each other on opposite sides of the canyon, not knowing we'd both switched places? Team Hazel was off to a very shaky start this morning.

A quick glance told me I was farther along my bridge than he was. So I gestured – with my *head*, not my hand – towards the city side of both bridges, directly behind him.

'Meet you over there!'

He practically galloped back to solid ground. Blessed idiot must've been part mountain goat. I kept my eyes on him so I wouldn't have to look down... and that's when I saw the two men come up behind him: dressed for a desert instead of a swamp, but they both had the same big muscles and supermodel bodies as the New Atlantis soldiers.

'Joe!'

He stopped. He looked concerned, like he thought I needed help or something. I braced myself and let go of one handrail to point, as hard as I could, at the armoured men behind him. *'Look ou – !'*

A wind gust from hell chose that moment to strike. The bridge gave a sickening lurch and I lunged sideways, catching the handrail so hard it made my fingers bleed. When I had my balance and my breath back, I looked up.

Joe was gone. So were the soldiers.

For a moment I couldn't move. People behind me were shouting. One man grabbed the handrail and gave it a shake to goad me forwards. I started to tell him what he could go do with a cactus... but then realised I couldn't hear myself. The ringing in my ears was too loud. Then the old familiar hum rose up around me, and I realised why I felt so lightheaded.

Oh. This ought to be interesting.

A few people screamed as I lost my grip and toppled over the side, and I had a split second to wonder whether I'd hit rock or mud

before I...

... landed with a bone-chilling *splash*.

The crowd's screams became clattering rainwater. It was pouring. I struggled to my feet, hopping through knee-deep puddles to the edge of the field. My first stash was empty now; I'd have to use my backup. Unfortunately, there really wasn't much point in getting dressed while it was pelting buckets, so I huddled in a little grove of marsh-alders and waited for the storm to pass.

I thought about Joe. I knew the soldiers might have killed him... might have, but hadn't, I guessed. They could have done that easily in the crowd. So they must have taken him somewhere.

In the end, I knew what I had to do. But deciding to do it was the hard part. I'd known Joe Brown the mystery naked man for all of about a day: was I really willing to take this big a risk for him? True, he was the only other Rover I knew... but more importantly, in all the years since the Big Shift, he was the only person I'd ever met who'd made me feel human again.

I got dressed and marched into town. Joe wasn't at his landing site, and this time neither were the soldiers. But something else was: a security camera. It was hidden in the wall, right above the doorway where the soldiers had been with their ladder this morning.

Well, okay then. They wanted to watch something? I'd give them a show.

'Hey!' I flung some nearby garbage at the camera. 'Hey! Up there! Yeah, I see you. And I know what you're doing. Everyone, look – they're spying on us! They're blending in and kidnapping people and, and... stealing our food, and probably having sex with goats! Come on, what are we going to do about it?'

It didn't take long for the soldiers to arrive.

'About time,' I scolded, as two of them grabbed my arms. One of them put something small and cold against my neck and everything went dark.

Well, I thought as I slipped into oblivion, I hope I know what I'm doing.

Joe

A siren woke me up. It hurt my ears. I tried to cover them and couldn't, something was holding my hands. I tried to sit up, and couldn't do that, either. I opened my eyes.

Bright overhead lights... computer screens *was I dreaming I thought all the computers were gone?*... metal instruments on a tray... I was in a doctor's office. Strapped to the exam table.

I used to get panic attacks just sitting in doctors' waiting rooms, so I tried to think about something else to calm down. It didn't work. The only thought that came was: the siren was probably a fire alarm, and I'd be burned to death before they got a chance to come back and dissect me.

'Help! Somebody!' No answer. 'Hello? I'm in here!' I shouted till my voice went hoarse, and when I finally heard footsteps coming I almost laughed with relief... until I saw my rescuer.

He was huge. He had a pig's face, tentacles for hair, and an empty socket where one eye should have been. I opened my mouth to shout again – or possibly faint – but the pig-faced man interrupted me.

'Negative frenzy.'

I blinked at him. 'What?'

'Not. Frenzy.' His voice gurgled like a clogged drain. I started calling for help again, and he walked over and gripped my elbow.

'Do not... panic.'

Easy for him to say. Up close he was even more of a nightmare: he looked like a robot made out of dead things. Tubes ran from his head down his back and connected his arms and legs. His one good eye stared straight ahead, while the empty socket oozed fluid down his face. And as bad as he looked, he smelled even worse.

I was so stunned that I shut up, which was good, because it made him let go of my elbow. After that he just stood there. He didn't ask why I'd been yelling, or tell me why the siren had gone off. He just stared into space and said nothing. I chewed my lip. I wanted him to go away, but if I called for help again, he might come back and dislocate my arm. 'Please,' I finally said, dry-mouthed. 'Please, is there some... someone else I could talk to?'

He didn't answer. Then several of his head-tubes glowed green, and a different voice came out of his mouth: 'Auto-pilot off. Mouthpiece on. Oh, and receive whoever pulled that fire alarm a flipping dismemberment. Breeding waste of time. Hello, human.'

The last bit seemed directed at me. '... hello?'

'Yes. Hello. Do not panic. We want to aid. We want to aid you stop moving.'

If that was supposed to make me feel better, it didn't. In my

experience, anyone who wants you to stop moving really doesn't have your best interests in mind. So I started to panic again.

The new voice said, 'Oh, excrement. It's headed to wound itself. Jump this, I'm going down.'

A few seconds later, two giant skulls in black dress suits walked into the room. Yes, really. The female-looking one was tall and had a dead lizard's skull on her face. The man was shorter and wore a skull with curly horns, like a deer or an antelope. The woman said words I couldn't understand as the pig-faced tentacle man spoke over her: 'Fornicating translator. Needs-must take care of your science projects; he's growing ripeness and smell.' Then she saw his empty eye socket. 'Oh, example! He's falling to bits!' She turned and gestured at me. 'Receive him a Rosebud.'

The antelope man took something out of a box and shoved it in my ear. It felt like an old music earbud. When he stepped away I realised I could read the symbols around the room now: the cabinet labels, the computer screens, the signs asking people to turn off the lights when they left.

'Gods, we lack an upgrade. Needs-must patch for old dialects.' I could understand the words in my head now, over the lizard woman's real speech and the tentacle man's translation. It was very strange. The woman said, 'Mouthpiece off. Auto-pilot on,' and tentacle man twitched and left the room.

The antelope man leaned over me. 'This may take some time. The Rosebuds aren't utilized to your language. But it's self-educating. The lengthier you stay talking at us, the lengthier-more words it will hoard.'

Apparently that was my cue to say something. After a few seconds the woman frowned and said, 'Oh enemies, is it impeded? Tell me we didn't gather a mental impede.' She loomed down at me. 'Nod... if... you... conceive... us.'

I licked my dry lips and tried to get my mouth to work. 'I understand you. Sort of.'

The woman looked relieved. 'Oh, thank galaxies. At least it can intercourse. Anyway, as I was saying before the translator frightened the essence out of you, we want to aid-help you. We want to help you stop moving. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

I frowned. 'You mean Flipping?' Now they looked confused. I wondered what their earbuds had said instead of Flipping.

'We... want... to... cure... you.' The lizard woman said. 'But first, we

lack to find out *why* you're Flipping.' She nodded to the antelope man, who picked something up from the metal tray beside me.

'No!' The panic came back. 'I don't want a cure, just let me go, please...'

'Loosen yourself,' said the antelope man. 'I'm a doctor.'

'I don't... like... doctors!'

'Oh. Well that's okay; I lied.'

He pressed the instrument against my arm. It didn't hurt, but I could see its chamber filling with my blood and looked away quickly so I wouldn't be sick.

'Why don't you tell us about your Flipping?' he suggested. 'How does it feel like?'

I guess that was his bedside manner. I tried to breathe slowly enough to answer. 'I don't... I don't know. Dizzy. Heavy. Humming...

'Humming?' He looked up quickly. 'Like what? Like a song?'

'No, like... engines. In the ocean. Coming in... waves...'

He put down the syringe and went to a computer. As he tapped some bits of light in front of it – no keyboard, it must have been some kind of hologram – the lizard woman suddenly said, 'Which world likes you the better?'

It sounded more like an order than a question. The antelope man stopped what he was doing and glanced over his shoulder.

'Well, come hither,' the woman went on, 'you must have enjoyed one the better. So, which one?'

I didn't think my answer would please her very much. Eventually the antelope man said, 'we're strange-ing him out. I'm ignorant why you wanted the helms; who's he going to tell about us anyway?', and took off his skull. Thankfully, there was a normal human head underneath it. He had dark hair and looked younger than me. 'There now. Just relax.' He grabbed a long thin tube from the medical tray and carefully shoved it up my nose. 'So, which world likes you the better? At least in the desert you're warm and dry, right?'

'But in the rain you all band together, don't you? You human people.' The lizard woman's skull came off too, and she was darker and older than the man. 'You're not so scattered and lonely then.'

I wondered which one it would be safer to upset: the woman who seemed to be in charge, or the man who had the tube up my nose. Before I could answer, though, they both started talking at me, overlapping each other so fast my earbud couldn't keep up.

'... better climate...'

'... more crop yield...'

'... less disease...'

'... lost habitat...'

'I don't care!' I shouted – probably a bit nasally. 'I don't care, I hate them both, I just want to be with her!'

They stared at me. The antelope man slowly pulled the tube from my nose and said, 'Her? Who's 'her'?'

I shouldn't have mentioned Ellie. *Stupid, stupid...* She was still out there somewhere. Now they'd start looking for her, too. The lizard woman saw that I was trying to hide something and said, 'Well well. I think our little flounder is in love. Well, go onwards. Tell us, who's the lucky ladyfish?'

The antelope man said, 'who cares? We're gathering data, not gossip.'

'But it's such a dilemma,' the lizard woman smiled. I decided I really didn't like her. 'You see, if he tells us, we might collect her too, if she's a freak like him. But if he doesn't, and we decide to keep him, he might never see her again. How lovely-horrible.'

Hearing it out loud made it worse. I closed my eyes to block her out, but she leaned down to whisper at me, and I couldn't close my ears.

'If you tell us, at least you'd be together. Maybe. So what will it be... betray her and keep her forever, or don't, and live your whole sad life alone?'

No. I didn't just dislike her. I hated her. I hated myself for bringing Ellie into this, and I hated the fact that I couldn't move my hands to wipe my eyes so the lizard woman wouldn't see me crying. Finally I took a deep breath.

'Better a lonely freak than a bully.'

The lizard woman said nothing. Making her angry probably wasn't very smart, and I don't know what would have happened if the computer hadn't made an alert noise just then.

'Aha! Finished.' The antelope man leaned over and called up a file. 'Your humming when you Flip – does it sound like this?'

It did. For a second, I'd actually braced myself. 'Yeah. Yes. That's it.'

He looked smug. 'Residual stabilisers,' he told the lizard woman. 'Their functional frequency, slowed to the planet's audible range.' He said more science-sounding things that I didn't understand, but

when he saw my confusion he cheerfully explained: 'the humming you hear when you Flip is part of a machine that we use to change reality. Only you're supposed to turn that part off when you switch from one world to the next. That's why your worlds keep bouncing back and forth: because someone tried to drive the car without reading the instructions, and ended up leaving the parking brake on. *Twice.'*

His grin met a stony silence. The room seemed to get colder, and for a moment I was sure that the antelope man and I were both about to be horribly murdered. Then the lizard woman waved a hand at me.

'Throw our little flounder back in the sea.' She watched the antelope man take the stunner to knock me out again... then looked up when another noise stopped him. A familiar noise. 'What the leaping hell is that?'

'Who knows?' The antelope man put the stunner down. 'I told you, we can't keep cutting corners; we need more people on security!'

I could hear the sound echoing down the corridor, so it must have been playing through the whole building.

It was a frog. A beatboxing frog. A frog beatboxing to techno music.

Ellie

I woke up with a twinge of nostalgia: never, since my very first Shift, had I been in a room this ugly. It looked like someone who made dental offices tried to build a prison cell. Its odd spherical design should have lent some intrigue, but didn't: your eye just wandered endlessly over the uniform shape and dim lighting without even the novelty of a corner to break the monotony. No furniture, either. All it seemed to contain were me and my disconcerting cellmate.

At first I'd thought they were a hologram. When I looked closer, though, I could see that they were human... or at least, they had been, at some point. Their vaguely person-shaped figure flickered in and out of view like a TV screen stuck between channels. I wasn't sure they could even see me. Sometimes they skittered and fretted around in a circle, or vanished completely, only to pop up again on the other side of the room.

A queasy chill gripped my gut. I knew exactly how it felt to be stuck between two worlds. Plus, the Shifts had been getting a lot closer together lately. If Roving was a disease that Joe and I had, it wasn't hard to think of this as its end stage: a half-life trapped in two places at once, never really there in either one.

I didn't want to think about that. So I got up and walked around the cell. The room's only interesting feature was a panel by the circular door – an access pad, probably – with a round patch housing something luminous inside it, like a light sculpture. I leaned down and squinted to get a better look.

There was a flash. The door made an ugly buzzing noise, and I jumped back. Okay, what did I just do? Maybe it was a motion sensor. Or a scanner, like those old grocery store thingummies. Obviously I didn't have a barcode on my face, though, so what had it scanned... my retina? That was an unsettling thought.

And unsettling thought met upsetting reality: the door beeped from the other side, then opened to let in the strangest creature I have ever seen. He looked like the fruit of some unholy union between man, pig, and octopus. Rows of tubes and tentacles ran from his head down his back, and he moved like a wind-up toy, all fits and starts.

He stopped in front of me. 'Assistance?'

Right away I noticed the blank stare, the broken language, the stiff-limp posture... not to mention the reek of rotting flesh in spite of the preservative. I was looking at a dead man walking. And even though that kind of grossed me out, a part of me really wanted to study him. I mean, matter reanimation? Come on. But I hadn't come here to play with dead things.

'Someone here kidnapped my friend,' I said, as firmly as I could. 'I demand to see him.'

Mr. Deadlocks didn't answer for a while. Fluid ran sluggishly through his tubes, and you could faintly hear his processors running. As I watched, a wormish sort of insect squirmed free from under his utility suit. It dropped to the floor, and when he noticed it, a thin tendril of blue light arced out from his belt buckle to fry it where it fell.

Walking corpse; walking bug zapper. Lovely.

Finally he said, 'You maintain here.'

If he left, my only chance of learning anything about this place would leave with him. 'Then I demand my rights! Who are you and

why have I been brought here?'

Deadlocks stopped. Processors whirred. He repeated, 'you maintain here,' then turned to go again, and I was so desperate to stop him that I said the first thing that popped into my head.

'You missed the bug!'

Holy cats, it actually worked. He paused and I kept talking. 'I just saw it move. Or maybe another one fell out. But it's definitely alive!'

He leaned down to look. 'It is deceased.'

'No, look, it twitched! Use your eyes!' I pointed hard... and then remembered the door scanner beeping to let him in when it had only buzzed at me. *Use your eyes.* Oh, this would not be pleasant. When he bent down to examine the insect carcass again, I stuck my thumb in his eye socket with a wet gooey squelch.

I ran to the door panel, trying not to gag, and hoped to high nirvana that a decomposing retina would still make the scanner work.

It did.

Beep!

Mr. Deadlocks stepped forward. 'You will arrest...'

But I was already halfway down the hall with his eyeball in my pocket.

I wasn't free yet, not by a long shot. But I was a little bothered by how easy that was. There were no guards or soldiers. Just one poor dead translator. The people who'd taken us were either very underfunded, or very arrogant. I hoped for arrogant. People made mistakes when they got cocky.

Either way, overconfidence was certainly not my problem right now. I felt like I had 'escaped prisoner' tattooed all over my forehead. I tried to act casual and look like I knew where I was going, but that was hard to do when everything about this place looked so odd and so *wrong* and all the signs were written in some weird alien language.

The further I went, though, the less conspicuous I felt. Whoever ran this place kept a very motley crew. I saw people of all shapes and sizes, some human and some not. The only thing they all had in common were these weird little buds in their ears. I wondered why – Communication? Hearing aids? Satellite radio? – but didn't have time to find out. I needed a plan. My anonymity wouldn't last long, especially if Mr Deadlocks was able to sound the alarm.

An alarm... oh, now that was a thought. Raising an alert wouldn't work if I beat him to it. I kept my eyes open, and soon enough, I spotted a bright red wall-mounted handle under a perspex sheath. Alien writing or not, I knew a fire alarm when I saw one.

Lights flashed. Claxons roared. And best of all, every door in the hallway opened automatically. I approved. Not only was it a very responsible safety design, it also meant I could peek inside each room as I followed the crowd to the fire exits. I kept a sharp eye out for things like forgotten ID cards or a loose set of keys... anything that might help a couple of fugitive Rovers escape. A few doors down, though, I found something even better.

A computer lab.

The hardware looked a lot different from the last time I'd seen one – no keyboards, for a start; just hologram projections dancing a few inches from each screen – but computers they definitely were.

Okay, Ellie. Play it cool. I walked a few more steps, then pretended I'd forgotten something and doubled back. Once I was safely inside, I fished Mr Deadlocks's eyeball from my pocket and used it to close the door behind me. Only then did I feel safe enough to let my guard down, and survey my new domain.

Nirvana.

Scared as I was, the thought of how far advanced this equipment must be actually made my mouth water. I'd been living in the Dark Ages for so long that seeing fresh tech was an absolute feast for the byte-starved soul. Granted, there was the small matter of figuring out how to use it, but how hard could it be? All I had to do was learn a whole new alien language well enough to hack the mainframe and not alert security with a single mistyped password. Hm. Maybe there was a manual or something.

I searched the room. No luck. I opened every unlocked drawer and cabinet in sight, and still nothing. Okay. No need to panic yet. Plenty of time. I searched more slowly just in case I'd missed something. Of course, all the manuals were probably written in alien too, but at least if I found one there might be pictures to guide me along.

I started to tremble, every last nerve on high alert for the all-clear siren that would bring back the lab techs. I chewed my lip. I pressed my temples. I pawed inside the cabinets – knocking over papers and pens, gadgets and bits of wiring, willing something useful to appear out of thin air – and then my hand hit a box I'd already seen three

searches ago, spilling its contents all over the floor.

Earbuds.

I picked one up. A tiny switch on its lower end flashed green when I pressed it. Slowly, carefully, I shoved it in my ear... and suddenly realised I could read the writing on the box.

Rosetta Buds. For All Your Communication Needs. Why Pay A Translator? The Rosetta Network Has You Covered.

... ah.

I turned back to the computer screens. Bit by bit, their floating symbols began to make sense. One screen already had a terminal window open, with a prompt just waiting for a command line. I smiled.

Now they were speaking my language.

It took a while to get the hang of it, tapping bits of light and second-guessing the earbud's wobbly translations. But the basic architecture was familiar. I said a silent prayer of thanks to myself for running code in my head all those nights when I couldn't sleep. The earbud was a surprise help, too: if I hit a firewall, it translated the source code so I knew how to disable it. If I started to type a line wrong, the system's autocorrect put in the right one. A few simple strokes, a few short commands... and I was in.

First, I disabled the all-clear siren. Next: Joe. I found lists of crew manifests and prison intakes – and something unsettlingly called 'specimen collection' – but no names or descriptions; just numbers. Dammit. Come on, Ellie, think. I grabbed a candy bar one of the lab techs had left behind and ate it to help me concentrate.

Well. I would just have to open all the prison cells. Risky, but if Joe was here, he'd mostly likely be in one of them. Plus, if the soldiers were busy trying to round up all the captives again, we might have an easier escape.

I called up a system map. The holding cells lay clustered on three levels – I was on the lowest – inside a free-floating sphere? I zoomed out the map.

... oh.

This wasn't a building.

It was a spaceship.

Well. Okay. Alright. This changed things a bit. Obviously we could still escape, it just might be a bit more challenging. Or a lot more. No time for that now, though. I saved the map and ran a print command, and a prompt line asked 'PRINT INTERACTIVE – Y_N?'

I hit 'Y'. A heavy swish sounded as the paper fell from one of the screens. It was heavy, and greasier than normal paper, and I soon saw why: the symbols on the map were moving. I ran my finger across it. The landmarks shown on the map drifted with it. I turned the paper sideways, and the orientation changed so the layout was still right-side up. I tapped a symbol inside a room, and a popup window told me the room's purpose and location.

Paper touchscreen. Awesome.

Before I started my rescue, though, I thought for a second. Joe didn't know I was here. If he got out, he wouldn't know to come look for me. I had to send him a message without giving myself away.

Oh, yes. *Perfect.*

I found what I wanted in some tertiary cultural archives. I embedded it well, disabling the doors and security grid while I was at it, then pressed 'execute.'

The melodious strains of a beatboxing frog blasted through the ship.

Giddy with success, I typed the final command to unlock the prison cells with all the flourish of a benevolent monarch: *you are all free. It pleases us to pardon you.*

... Yeah. Remember what happens when you get cocky? Someone thumped the door just then, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

'Hey. What the curse word? This one's stuck, too.'

I looked at the map. The door was the only way out of this room. Well, the best way not to get caught is not to act guilty. So I squared my shoulders, pried open the door, and walked right out past a group of puzzled lab techs in the hall.

'All clear in there. You can go back in.'

None of them followed me. By the time I heard an angry bellow and a candy wrapper crumpling, I was already halfway to the next level.

'What the... hey! Thief! You owe me a Giddy-bar!'

Joe

'Right. I'll just wait here, then, shall I?'

They didn't hear me, of course. When The Frog Jam came on, the lizard woman and the antelope man had left the room arguing, leaving me alone again. Which is scarier than it sounds. I learned a

new sympathy for babies then: when you can't move your arms or scratch your nose or get up to use the toilet on your own, and you don't know if anyone's ever going to come and help you, then you'd start wailing, too.

I thought about calling for help again. Then I remembered the tentacle man, and didn't. I tried twisting my hands in the straps, hoping the movement and the sweat might help me slip out of them, but they were like those finger-trap things you used to get in joke shops: the harder you pulled, the tighter they squeezed.

That made the panic come back. *Well,* I thought, *at least if I hyperventilate, I might pass out and forget that I'm here all alone waiting to be cut up like a lab rat.* My throat was so tight it felt like I'd choke on my own breath. Then the song stopped playing, and the silence it left was awful, making me wonder if I'd gone mad and imagined the whole thing.

Then the door opened.

'Finally! I've been looking forever.' Ellie dropped something on the cabinet and rushed to my table, pulling at the restraints. 'Sorry it took so long. I had to poke someone's eye out and hack an alien computer grid and then you weren't in the jail cells, but then I remembered the specimen collection list, so I thought, well, medical bay or science lab, so... yeah. Anyway. Hi.'

I just stared. I had definitely gone mad. 'Are you real?' Instead of answering, she pinched me hard on the shoulder. 'Ow!' I started to smile. 'Oh my god. You. Are. Amazing. How did you even...? Ellie Green, you are a miracle genius.'

'Yeah. I know.' She kicked the table with a huff. 'How did they get you into these things anyway?'

'I don't know. Unconscious-ly.'

She grunted. 'Any knives or scalpels around here?'

Some of my hope deflated. 'You're a miracle genius and you can't undo a strap?'

'Well, there aren't any buckles or hinges! Just a... oh, wait, never mind.' *Clunk!* 'Found the latch.'

I scrambled off the table and my knees gave out – should have waited for my legs to wake up – but she caught me, and that was quite okay. I wondered if I should say something or kiss her. Before I could decide she said, 'We're on a spaceship.'

'... pardon?'

'Yeah. In space and everything. Wait till you look out the windows;

you'll flip. Well. Not literally, I hope.'

I gulped. 'So how do we get off it?'

A loud door-buzz cut off her answer. We froze. It buzzed again, and there was cursing from outside. We tensed to run, but there was nowhere to go.

The door shot open. Ellie grabbed something off the cabinet and aimed it at the antelope man, who'd come in with more medical equipment. His surprise turned to anger as he rolled his eyes and stamped his foot. 'Fucking security team! The whole damned ship could be on fire and they'd be watching porn in the crew lounge.'

'Don't move!' Ellie looked scared, but definitely ready to use whatever she was pointing at him. 'Show me your hands.'

'Or what...?' he scoffed, '... you'll staple my lips together?'

I looked at what Ellie was holding. It did kind of look like a stapler. I had no doubt that she could still find a way to hurt him with it, though, so before things could get ugly I said, 'Help us. Help us escape.'

He stared at me. 'Now why would I do that?'

That was a good question. Ellie and I looked at each other. Threats wouldn't work. Bribes? That was a laugh. I could try to appeal to his better nature, but I wasn't sure he had one. Then it came to me. 'Because it'll make her look bad.'

We both knew who 'her' was. He raised an eyebrow. 'Go on.'

I cleared my throat. 'Well. She must have... superiors, right? Your boss lady? If we escaped right under her nose, that wouldn't look good. You might get promoted.' I swallowed nervously. 'Or at least get a better security team.'

He stared at me for a long time. 'You're smarter than you look. But she knows everything that happens on this ship. Why would I risk it?'

'Because I disabled the security grid.' Ellie nodded at a corner of the ceiling. The security cameras – at least I'm guessing that's what they were – lay still, their lights winked out.

Our captor looked grudgingly impressed. 'You did that? How?'

She shrugged. 'Skills.'

I held my breath as the antelope man looked back and forth between us, deciding. 'If I do this – *if* – you know you can never come back here.'

'Not a problem, trust me.'

'No,' he said, slowly lowering his medical equipment to one of the

cabinets. 'I mean, here, as in, this whole system. I can send you somewhere the machine can't reach – '

'Machine?' Ellie frowned.

'They've been using a machine to swap the worlds back and forth,' I explained, and she seemed to accept it pretty calmly, though I could tell she'd have some serious questions for the antelope man later.

' – but if you come back, you'll show up on the sensors again. So, no planets in this whole system. No Earth. I do this; you can never go home again.'

I hadn't thought of that. Ellie saw me hesitate. 'Are you kidding? This is our chance.'

I fidgeted. 'At least it's Earth. At least it's home.'

'But it's not. Not anymore. Not while these morons are playing ping-pong with it. No offense.' She looked at the antelope man.

'None taken. Eagle-beak.'

I ignored him and leaned towards Ellie, lowering my voice. 'I don't trust him. What if he sends us somewhere horrible just for a laugh? What if he sends us somewhere with no air?'

'Why would he do that? If he wanted us dead he could just call the guards and kill us right now.'

The antelope man cracked his knuckles. 'The lady has a point.'

'Look, can we just... have a moment, please?' I hated that I was arguing with Ellie, our first fight, and I really hated that we had an audience for it.

She took a deep breath. 'Listen. Joe. Back in the cells, I saw something... some*one*... our Shifts keep getting closer together, right? Two in one day, last time. What happens when it's two in one hour? Two a minute? Six a *second?* I don't know if we could even survive like that, but... I really don't want to find out.'

Her eyes were wide. Whatever she'd seen in that cell had really frightened her. But I was scared too, and I couldn't find the words to tell her why: before the Big Shift, she was a computer genius. I was a fry cook. If the Shift hadn't happened, we'd probably never have met. And as bad as it was on Earth, stuck between two worlds, at least I was special to her there: I was the only other Rover she knew. Would she still like me if we didn't have that in common anymore?

She must have guessed a little of what I was thinking, because she squeezed my hand. 'It's worth the risk. At least somewhere else we'd

have a *chance.'*

I knew she was right. We had to leave. Even if it meant I might lose her. But I wanted to hold onto this... to her... for just one more minute. Team Hazel. Green and Brown together. Just a little longer...

She let go of my hand. 'Okay. What do I need to do?'

She didn't say it to me. She said it to the antelope man. He motioned her out the door, and she went without turning around to see if I'd follow.

I think she already knew I would.

We must have made an odd trio, creeping down the corridors; him with his antelope skull and us two shabby-looking Rovers. I held my breath every time someone passed by, but they just nodded at the antelope man and kept walking. Finally, we came to a dark room with metal grids for floors and ceilings. The hum of some massive machinery thrummed on the filtered air.

'In there.' Five see-through pods lined the far wall. They looked like elevators. I've never liked elevators. But Ellie walked right into one, so I had to follow her.

The antelope man waved me out. 'Separate pods. Unless you want to get there wearing each other's arms and legs.'

I moved one pod over and paused outside the door. 'Where's "there"? Where are you sending us?'

'Better if you don't know.' He tapped a console and didn't look at us. 'It's not paradise, but then you're used to that. You want a good hiding place; go where no one ever looks.' He glanced up at me. 'Sometime today, then?'

I stepped inside the pod. The door shut with a sucking noise like a vacuum seal, cutting off the outside world, and all I could hear were the echoes of my own breath. We were about to die. I knew it in my bones. I looked over at Ellie in the next pod... and she was *grinning*. Like we were on a roller coaster; about to start the best ride of our lives. I really hoped she was right.

'Okay then.' The antelope man's voice sounded over a tinny speaker somewhere in the pod. 'Happy landings.'

The air pressure fell. My ears popped and my fingers started tingling. It felt like I was about to Flip... hopefully for the last time, ever. I looked back at Ellie. She winked at me as the room started to dissolve around us, and I suddenly remembered the playground game she'd named us after –

Red Rover, Red Rover, send Joe and Ellie right over...

- and then we were gone.

SURVEILLANCE DATA
RECORDS BAY
TIMESTAMP: 010: 00 : 07634.012
[EXPUNGED]

VISUAL: A bored young man sits watching several rows of floating screens, tapping his desk console to change the views on each one. A tall woman with a lizard skull tucked under her arm walks in.

WOMAN: Give me good news.

MAN: Nothing yet.

WOMAN: And you call yourself an expert. How hard can it be to find two people?

MAN: In a whole system? Pretty hard, actually. If they landed on a stable world, the blips from their temporal shifts won't even show up on our scanners.

WOMAN: Well then, use that pretty head of yours. Widen your search parameters. Look for cultural anomalies. People get stupidly sentimental about their old planets and customs. If I were you, and I were smart, I'd look for Terran artefacts on a world where no Terran's meant to be.

MAN: Artefacts? They left here with the clothes on their backs; you think they're ready to open up an Earth souvenir shop?

WOMAN: (sighing) What about their bloodwork?

VISUAL: The man shuffles tiredly through some papers on his desk.

MAN: Inconclusive, without a larger sample size. Best guess is a recessive gene, triggered by the temporal instability.

WOMAN: Oooh. Chronosensitivity? Sounds like one of our own's been dipping their wick in amongst the primates. How revolting.

MAN: Yeah. Well. Speaking of intermingling, that female specimen damaged the system more than you think, you know. There's no way the Sweepers got out all the bugs yet.

WOMAN: I'm not paying those glorified exterminators to come back just so you can flirt with their service rep. Anyway, the system is fine. Completely back to normal. No blips, no bugs, no glitches.

AUDIO: Data/file/TheFrogJam.aur begins at maximum volume.
WOMAN: ... except for *that*. For the love of sanity, can no one fix that bedamned intercom?!

VISUAL: The woman exits. The young man turns back to the monitors, tapping his fingers in time with the music, until one screen makes an alert beep. He pulls it to the centre and widens the image: a graffiti wall on [REDACTED], a far-flung desert world, decidedly past the jurisdiction of either Earth or the Faction. Among the gang slogans and drawings of sexual organs is one word in Terran script, not painted, but scratched into the stone. The system helpfully calls up an archaic glossary definition:

n; adj
1. A greenish-brown colour.
2. The edible seeds of a Terran tree species, or the oil derived therefrom.
3. A word that means green and brown together.

The young man stares at the image for a long time. Then he mutters and shakes his head.

MAN: Idiots.

He taps the console.

DELETE
ERASE SEARCH PARAMETERS – Y/N?
> Y

He stands and stretches, then switches off the monitors before leaving the room. The main screen goes black, leaving a ghostly after-image of the Terran word as the only fading proof that it ever existed.

So, that's really where you want to end it?

Yeah. Why?

I don't know, it just seems kind of... vague.

Well, vague is good, right? If we get specific they could track us down. Best to keep a low profile.

Says the woman who defaced a public wall right in the middle of town.

It's a graffiti wall; that's what it's there for. Budge over, my feet are getting cold. Oh, and close the flap; I think another sandblaster's rolling in tonight.

Mmm. Hope the canvas holds.

It will. So, it really bothers you, that last part? Where we left it?

Well. People do like a happy ending.

Okay. We'll add a, whatsit. Picture. Of what we wrote on the wall. Happy?

Yeah. I am. I mean, that's good. Good ending... Ellie?

Mmmm?

You awake?

No.

Me either. 'Night.

'Night.

Playing for Time VI

'Tefen?' says Triphis.

The boy just stares into the chronomasticon, his head propped on one hand. It looks quite natural, even relaxed, except that he's been lying like that for six hours and he hasn't blinked once.

'My cheeky cherub,' she says loudly into his ear, 'After that awkward last experiment - especially given your failure to find those escaped subjects – it's even more urgent that we learn how to properly control the device. So hurry it up or I'll bite your head!'

Nothing. She kicks him in the hip, not particularly gently, but there's no reaction. She sighs. If this keeps up he's going to need some kind of medical support. Or she's going to need a new apprentice.

Bored, she selects a fresh alternative reality, and cautiously initiates it. He doesn't even notice.

Tefen has been pushing deeper, deeper, deeper into the chronomasticon, through layers and layers of alien geometry, until there is and has only ever been these intricate designs. He could, literally, remain here forever, become a subset of the machine's mathematics, dispersed through its incalculable volume as a lovely wisp of cadmium orange and vermilion.

The chronomasticon, sadly, has other ideas. As it has had, from the moment his fingertips touched it, moments before the security drones dragged him away.

Tefen's doubly altered brain is precisely tuned in, his mind is as perfectly wide open as a peach blossom. In response, the device unlocks itself, makes itself equally open. His small soul and its infinite one kiss in numbers, shuddering.

The tattoo Triphis had stitched to Tefen's back, to the bodies of each of her boys, had two purposes. One, it gave them access to any area of the ship at any time, something the crew often grumbled about behind their backs. Two, it prevented them from leaving the ship, something the crew laughed at them for. The uniformed drones routinely teleported down to the planets they passed, bringing back supplies, partying and holidaying as they liked.

Security sometimes stopped Tefen on his long wanders around the

ship's bubbles, telling him Triphis had ordered such-and-such an area off-limits. Often they let him pass even if they stopped other crew members getting in. At first Tefen had thought they were treating him with deference. Eventually he realised they were just ignoring him.

He had visited this bubble twice before without noticing anything remarkable about it. Inside the unlit, dusty storeroom, empty except for a few unopened crates and some furniture draped in sheets, was an entire small temple. Each stone had been painstakingly marked and moved, the whole building reconstructed here on a sturdy metal floor. And then, as with so many of Triphis' acquisitions, it had simply been left to gather dust. It was a beautiful old thing, carved with words in a language long since lost, and delicate images that might be creatures or some kind, or only abstract patterns. It was still lovely, but now without any meaning or use, it was pointless. That had made him a little sad.

It hadn't occurred to Tefen before that the temple's entrance was bricked up. Inconvenient, surely, for priests and worshippers? Obvious as hell, in fact? Why hadn't he seen it before?

He wasn't going to be able to smuggle a sledgehammer down here (not in these trousers, anyway) so he snuck in a pocket disintegrator and started chipping away at the bricks, carefully, shaving off a few millimetres at a time. Finally there was a crunch and a crumble – he had cut a hole large enough to look through.

He looked through. Nothing. He dialled the disintegrator to emit normal light and shone it inside. No special effects of any kind; just the dim interior of an old building, smelling of dust.

What had he expected, exactly? Even if he had guessed right, and that Triphis' obsession with angels was more than just a religious fetish, why assume they'd be all blasting trumpets, and wings, and eyes?

Why assume they existed at all? The red weed could have been lying to him. He could easily have misunderstood what it was trying to say. Or it might have wanted him to come here for some other reason entirely, in which case, the smart thing to do would probably be to leave now.

Except that the door was gone. Tefen blinked and then trotted fast to the wall where he'd come in. It wasn't just that the gap had irised shut; the double ring of fluorescence was gone altogether. He turned fast on his heel, in case he'd simply got disoriented, but as

far as he could see he was on the inside of an exitless pearl.

Something laughed.

'Oh shit,' said Tefen.

A beam of silver-pink-white light shot over his shoulder, playing over the empty wall. He stepped carefully to the side, trying to keep out of the splashing light, but it caught him, then flicked away, then back again. It was coming from the hole he'd made in the bricks.

The light switched itself off suddenly. He heard the laugh again.

Sometimes in dreams he would think of the worst possible thing to do, only to find himself immediately doing it.

He walked up to the temple and put his eye up to the hole.

In the doorway, a face lifted itself to look back at him. For long moment it had no real expression, as though the person behind it was focussed on something infinitely far away.

It wasn't a mirror reflection. And yet there was the ghost of his own face, the face the rumours said Triphis had been looking for across the galaxy. This face was solider, thicker neck, longer, straighter nose. There was something about its symmetry that made a blush run across Tefen's cheekbones, but it wasn't desire. The face made him feel ugly.

The eyes blinked, and that look of blank peace was gone, replaced by a half-smile. Since coming aboard the ship Tefen had looked at a lot of outer space, and these eyes are blacker than that.

'Don't be afraid,' said the angel, terrifyingly. Tefen spun, backed against the bricks. 'You don't have to tell me anything.' The lips moved, but the actual sound seemed to be coming from just inside Tefen's ears. 'It's not as though I haven't been paying attention. No, you listen.'

The red weed was twice as old as the Earth, two-thirds as old as the whole universe, but Tefen was suddenly, powerfully aware of his fundamental kinship with it. He and the plant had been made out of the same stuff by the same inefficient processes. Oh, Triphis, you didn't touch a Celestial Sphere, but you did touch something heavenly - the being he was facing – he wasn't facing it. This was just a sort of translation. With a wrench he understood that the bubbles, the whole ship was just the same: symbols his tiny, fleshy brain could cope with.

If he saw the creature itself – no, if he saw the creature whose errand boy this was -

'I'm only twenty,' blurted Tefen. The angel laughed, sounding like

a carillon exploding, and the human clapped his hands over his ears and let out a sob.

'In this ship, everything rolls upwards,' it said. 'Everything rolls up to the highest number, eventually. It's a simple law of nature. Do you understand?'

Everything but the angel's black eyes had become a scintillating blur at the edge of Tefen's senses – his past, his present, his future, melting into the silver-pink-white light of the room.

'Do you understand?'

'No!' Tefen yelped, but then he realised he did understand. Something was being written into his thoughts, as though it's being scratched onto the inside of his skull, where he can't lose it.

'The most dangerous and interesting things are all kept together,' says the angel. 'Just out of her reach, in the most rarely seen bubble, the one with the highest number.'

'Yeah,' said Tefen. 'Yeah, I see it.' The angel was writing the equations into the structures in Tefen's brain created by the memory pills he took - the same structures that made Triphis recognise his potential as a Faction practitioner. The angel was turning the pathways he used for translating languages into circuits for crunching esoteric numbers. He saw the mathematics behind the exocosmic ship's strange number of components – as simple and logical a thing as the obvious fact that circles have six sides – the equations that told you when to look for this or that number of bubbles.

Blood was running out of his nose. He couldn't help a tiny giggle escaping as well. He didn't care that his brain was being altered, not when it all made perfect, dazzling sense.

'What was your sin?' he asked. 'Why did she lock you up?'

'I can't tell you,' said the angel. The words were laceratingly sad, bringing Tefen out of his giddy pleasure.

'Is it because I couldn't understand?'

'If you knew... you'd be damned as well.'

The face shot forward, the light piercing through the bricks and stones of the temple.

'Don't touch me!' Tefen shrieked, paralysed.

Then - or perhaps some time later - he found himself lying on the floor of the bubble. He sat up, rubbing his chilly arms, looking around anxiously; the room was empty now, the door restored... but there was still a hole in the doorway of the temple.

He fled.

The Víkingr Mystique
Dorothy Ail

Bright blue skies, all the other cars keeping a respectful distance, my Buick Wildcat (the brand new 1963 convertible, thank you very much) roaring down the highway. General Motors couldn't have asked for a better looking commercial. Except that their driver wouldn't have been a greying housewife, running a little to fat and somewhat past her best. And as for the passenger...

'You really don't have to show off your wonderful fighting skills just for me. I don't mind paying for my gas, that's what I usually do.' I said hopefully.

'But this is what I've been trained for,' Aldis said cheerily. 'Threatening, looting, maybe some limb chopping if anyone gets violent. You haven't seen me do anything except a simple taunt so far.' She caressed her frightfully-honed, double-bladed, softly glowing battle-axe. Not quite sharp enough to split hairs – she'd been rather indignant when I asked whether you could use the elegantly curved edges for shaving – but it was certainly a dangerous looking weapon. She knew how to use it, too.

'Perhaps you could go show off your battle-axe, demonstrate it or whatever it was you had in mind, and then I can pay for it when you're done?' Dealing with her felt like petting a tiger who sleepily purred under your hand and wanted you to tickle its ears – both you and pussy enjoyed it, but you wouldn't look forward to the reckoning.

'I think you may be missing the point,' she said, as I rolled into the service station. A little red-haired boy was sprawled between the two pumps with a stack of comic books. He jumped up as I settled the car, babbling questions.

'Oh, wow! Are you one of those Viking warrior girls like on TV? Can I have your autograph? Is that axe real? What kind of armour is that you're wearing? D'you like America?'

'Yes to all those things,' Aldis said, laughing. 'You know all about our invasion, then?'

'Oh yeah! It was on the radio, how you've all come down from space and you're gonna take all our valuable stuff n' maybe kill everybody – '

'Of course we're not going to kill everybody. Then you wouldn't be able to make more valuable stuff, would you? And then we

wouldn't be able to plunder anything.' She slid out of the car and patted him on the head. I smiled, guessing that children were pretty much the same all over; they probably weren't much different on her home planet.

'I guess not,' the boy said, with that seriousness which youngsters can invest the simplest concepts. 'No, I guess not. Well, I guess Dad will be all right with that then. I'll go get him.'

'No, no, you stay here and talk to Aldis, I'll get him,' I said hastily. Adults' reactions might be something else again.

The youngster started showing Aldis his copy of 'Spaceman Spiff Davis', while I strode over to the small stand and peered inside. 'Hello?' I called quietly.

There was a thump, and a sleepy-eyed man clutching a shotgun pulled the door wide open. He saw past me to where Aldis and the boy were sitting together on the ground, probably comparing fictional spaceships to the real ones, and trained the gun on her. Or would have done, if I hadn't yanked it down so fast he nearly shot his own foot off instead.

'What in the world do you think you're doing, aiming a gun towards a child like that?' I demanded, in as forcible a whisper as I could manage.

He caught the cue and kept his voice down, though not as quietly as I would have liked. 'That's my son out there, my little Howard, you've shown up with one of those blasted space Vikings or whatever it is, and you're telling me to put my gun down?'

'Víkingrs,' I corrected automatically. 'Look, I'm travelling with her -
'

'Travelling with her?'

'Yes, she's my ticket back to Minnesota, she's very friendly, wouldn't hurt a stray dog, but if she sees a weapon aimed at her you're dead, mister,' I hissed, doing my best to hide the gun's outline behind my bulk in case Aldis looked this way. 'They don't like guns, but we're just here to get some gas. If you bury that thing away in the back and come out like you never thought of threatening her it'll be fine, just fine. I haven't seen her hurt anybody yet – I'd hate for you to be the first.'

'You seem to know an awful lot about it,' he snapped, but with a sour note that sounded just like Anthony when he'd lost an argument. Dear Anthony. I wondered whether I'd be able to get through to him in the phone booth.

Meanwhile, though, he'd slackened his hold on the gun; I quietly slid it out of his hands and laid it on the ground between my heels. 'Just go out there, don't talk too much, and give me a full tank. And here, you'd better take this now.' I pulled a few more dollars out of my pocketbook than were strictly necessary – he counted it and I watched with relief as fear settled into straightforward greed.

'Just don't cause any trouble, will you?' he said, and barged out past me. He made a move towards his child as though he wanted to grab the boy and run, but didn't quite start; instead he moved around to the other side of the car and meekly started pumping gas.

'Howard, Howard, you were supposed to stay inside and wake me up as soon as you saw anybody, not go make friends with them,' he said weakly. A man with a constitution like that shouldn't go pointing guns at *anybody*, I thought. Poor Howard was probably in for a licking as soon as we left.

'Dad, they're nice,' the youngster said carelessly. 'She signed my comic book and everything, look.'

'He'll make quite a warrior someday,' Aldis laughed. 'He's already told me that our ships would be more threatening if we used ‘super ray guns' instead of hand weapons. I'll have to send along the suggestion.'

'That's, uh... nice to hear, I guess. Suppose you'll be on your way now, then?'

'Oh, certainly,' I said before she could respond. 'Just a quick stop.'

'Aw,' Howard said.

'Going to Minnesota, eh? There going to be more like you coming this way?' I had the feeling that he wasn't going to offer to wash my windows.

'I don't know, honestly. I'm just another American like yourself.'

'Travelling with her? Sure you're not spying for those ships up there, or something?'

I glared at him. He subsided.

As soon as we were fuelled up, I pried Aldis away from Howard's comics and drove off as quickly as I could. She was bubbling over with chit-chat, about our charming youngsters and how amusing American advertising was. Hadn't noticed a thing.

Good, I decided; the better she liked this country the easier it'd be. With any luck I'd be back home to Maple Street before she got into any real fighting, which with a blade like that, I supposed was inevitable. Though my luck had held out pretty well so far.

For instance, the Vikings had courteously arrived at the end of my yearly New York vacation rather than the start – my car was packed up, ready to go, and I was enjoying a last (slightly regretful) luncheon at the Tavern on the Green. Luxurious July warmth one minute, an unsettling wind the next. Then a fellow diner pointed to the sky, screamed shrilly, and fainted away across her Waldorf salad as though she was in training to be a stage heroine. We all looked around, but I like to think I was one of the first to glance up – some photographer got the shot for the first post-Ragnarok cover of *Life*, the dozens and dozens of longships fluttering down over Central Park. For a few moments I couldn't take them in, bewildered by their sheer storybook quality – great wooden vessels set with creamy sails, splashing into the lake and sailing on it as smoothly as they had through the air, positively bristling with cheering fantastically-clad fighters.

Who all jumped out and charged straight towards us.

You never saw such chaos in your life. Tuxedo-clad men overturning tables, rich and leisured society dames taking a run for it. I abandoned my seat with the rest, already regretting the lack of city parking that had my Buick stranded blocks away. Started off towards it at a good sprint, but a few looks back told me that the warriors were concentrating on all those beautifully dressed figures, with jewellery and cufflinks flying everywhere. For once I was grateful for my sober, sensible clothes and worn driving cap (Anthony doesn't really like me bringing anything fancy along, and while I usually bring a necklace or two they were safely packed at the bottom of my suitcase). Some Adonis in half a ton of amour glanced me over dismissively and ran past in search of more interesting pickings. I eased into a light jog.

Then we got slowed down further at the sidewalks; plenty of the locals were running in the opposite direction, directed by the natural instinct of all rubberneckers. The sight of an apple-vendor's cart stopped me altogether – no knowing when I'd have another chance to stock up, was there? I hastily bargained for a dollar's worth of Baldwins and set off again with a heavy sack, when the most absurdly ordinary thing in the world happened: a gang took advantage of the chaos to corner me at the entrance to Hell's Kitchen.

I'd taken a chance parking down that side street, but my car was still there and still undamaged. I was a mere half block away when the group of youths apparently just gabbling about the sudden violence turned out to have been discussing violence on their own

account, with guns and switchblades, and... well, it's difficult to remember all the details, but there must have been half a dozen or so just waiting for a goose like me. Not much good to shrink back in terror, but there I was, still breathing rather heavily and not too fit, up against some very large and violent looking toughs. The best I could do was swing about the apple bag in as threatening a manner as I could manage and shout that would they please go away?

No, I wouldn't have given myself very good odds either. For a moment, though, I thought it must have worked - the foremost of the boys let out a most unmasculine shriek and skedaddled down the alley, followed in short order by the rest of his mates. A deep, rich chuckle behind me suggested otherwise. I turned round to see my impromptu rescuer. The way the day was going, anything up to and including George Reeves himself dropping out of the sky I'd have taken in stride.

This being life, it was something both more and less sensible than that – one of the Vikings, naturally, all flickering battle-axe and massive shield, a marvel of shining chain mail. Lots of shiny exciting parts I didn't have names for, back then. An older woman, not much taller than I, with a broad humorous face and greying curls that she was shoving back into place as she taunted the retreating boys.

'I'm Gloria,' I said meekly. 'It's very nice to meet you.'

'Aldis,' she said cheerfully, and stuck out her right hand in a motion that was very nearly ordinary. I regarded it and her blankly for a moment, then cautiously ventured out my hand for a shake, finding hers warm and a touch sweaty but perfectly human. As though it belonged to a neighbour who'd just finished her gardening or kitchen mopping, not a Valkyrie who was still stolidly grasping a great carven battle-axe in her other hand.

She bobbed her head at me respectfully. 'Are all the women in America as brave as you, then?'

'Well... probably... they wouldn't thank you to all find out that way, though,' I murmured, thick-headed with reaction and surprise – kind as her words were, their plain bluntness when I'd have expected Old English or something of the sort disconcerted me. 'I'd have preferred not to myself... uh, aren't you invading us or something?'

The links in her mail clicked against each other when she shrugged. 'Oh, I suppose so, but I wanted to do a bit of sightseeing

first. Wait until it all cools down a bit up there, I didn't think it would be much fun to charge in attacking before you'd all heard about us. It's a big country, I'm sure there must be lots to see.'

I smothered a smile, calculating more rapidly than I'd ever done in my life. If my lucky star had seen fit to drop an obliging good angel capable of obliterating anything in my way, I'd be crazy not to take all the advantage I could. Of course there are! And you know what, I'll tell you one experience you'd love – an American road trip.'

She frowned slightly. 'Oh, but I was going to start off with looking around the city first, see the sights. You know?'

I screwed up my courage and wrapped an arm around Aldis' shoulder, guiding her towards my Buick as if she was a mere naïve slip of a girl. 'But it really is just the thing, if you want to get to know the good old US of A. Lots of our best writers have done, John Steinbeck, that Kerouac fellow, erm... why, Mark Twain did that sort of thing, and he didn't even have a car. Oh, you wouldn't believe the things I've seen, little shops and the cute motels, the oddest roadside attractions – there's this pink elephant I saw in Iowa only a few weeks ago...' Somehow I manoeuvred her and her assorted weaponry into my convertible, and after that nothing could have stopped me from hightailing it. At a speed that may not have been strictly legal. But if spaceships landing in New York don't count as an emergency, what does?

'So are you from this city, or elsewhere?' Aldis said casually as I careened through a red light and missed a lamppost by inches. I flatter myself I'm a good driver, but right now I wanted to get through the tunnel before everyone else did.

'Me? No, no. I hail from Minnesota. I just came up to the city for a vacation, same as I do every year. Got used to the place when I was young, almost took a degree studying anthropology, in fact, but I got married before I finished. Though I still enjoy coming out here, in the summer. Buy a few decent hats. There's a few friends I've kept in touch with, get me passes to Miss Lambert's show, high society gossip – of course they do tend to think it's rather sad that I live out in the sticks,' I jammed the breaks on at a traffic stoppage – a biggish pileup, but no cars being flung through the air or anything silly like that. 'But Anthony's a good egg. My husband. Dear me, I'm rambling. Do you even have husbands where you come from?'

Aldis chuckled again; her laugh dropped through the female

register into baritone if not bass, but I grew to like it after a while. Goodness knows she uses it often enough. 'Well, of course we do! We're Víkingrs, not complete barbarians. And I learned a few things about your country as a child, it was in the leaving skalds. They said that the USSR was good if you wanted to be somewhere that was more like the homelands, but personally I can't stand cold.'

'So you are Vikings – no, sir, you're not cutting me off like that... ha! Serves you right. Sorry, you were saying?'

'Not Vikings. Víkingrs. There's a difference. We're the raiders, the ones with weaponry who charge off. The Vikings are the ones who didn't want to come or are up in space, the ones who are just...' she shrugged again. 'Support staff?'

By the time we were out on the highway I was plumbing her for information, spurred on by a vague sense of concerned citizenship and a much stronger one of curiosity. Aldis matched me question for question pretty well – whatever she knew about Americans didn't include the minutiae of highway sign construction, our obsession with nicely cut green grass, and why we hadn't invented the seat belt yet (I took a chance on her psychology and said that we had, only I enjoyed living dangerously sometimes. She beamed appreciatively.) But let's face it, you probably either know already or you don't care about Burma-Shave roadsigns, so I'll skip to the exciting bits.

The story was, a little less than a thousand years ago ('I know there's a translation metric, but converting into your years is such a nuisance'), there'd been colonies of Vikings spreading west. Most had eventually turned back to Iceland and more hospitable lands, or abandoned their own warrior ways in favour of taking up those of the native population, but a small band, particularly passionate about the worship of their gods, had grimly clung on ('definitely somewhere on this continent, but they didn't have the technology to map things properly in those days'). Christianity was making inroads everywhere else – they knew their best chance to preserve their rituals was to stay so far away from the rest of the world that no missionaries would ever come find them.

'And then, the gods came,' Aldis said, fiddling with the radio dial as expertly as if she'd be born to pick up broadcasts. 'Odin, Thor, even Loki, to tell us that our quixotic beliefs were to be rewarded, that we were to be taken to a more hospitable land – not one of the Nine Worlds, but a tenth, one that would nurture and help us

preserve our traditions against the day that we were needed.' She settled the channel on some pop song about a birthday party. How frivolous.

'Did they build you a city on a hill, too?' I pondered that use of 'quixotic'. Come to think of it, Aldis didn't sound especially Scandinavian – if anything, her voice's soft burr sounded more like my Midwestern accent. They must have done their homework before coming here, if all their warriors could speak English this well.

She looked at me quizzically, and I flapped a hand dismissively, then hastily put it back on the steering wheel and guiltily checked my mirror to see if anyone might have observed my breach of driving. 'Never mind, stray thought. Go on.'

'Well, of course our ancestors took them up on it. Built the first bannerships and sailed off into the western sky, and we've been waiting against the day it was right for us to return. Fenrir would swallow the sun so many times or something, it's been calculated for centuries.'

A sort of holy crusade – to fly off into the heavens, to maintain their pure and holy vigil, and to come back in the great hour of need. Heavens alone knew that anyone keeping tabs on the planet for a millennium might have thought the twentieth century was it. I tried to recall whether I'd ever heard something similar. King Arthur, yes, Charlemagne, if I remembered right, but nothing about the return of Vikings *en masse*, even in local Kensington traditions. It was embarrassing to think that I was in the presence of a legend the planet had simply forgotten.

Then I caught a sideways glimpse of a light, mischievous look crossing her features. 'Supposedly, anyway. Do you know, I don't believe the half of it. There may have been gods once – there must have been something, anyway, we couldn't have left Earth all by ourselves. But Vulcan's just another planet, though it's certainly red and hot enough for Muspelheim. We wouldn't be able to live there at all without the pressure domes.'

'A red planet - you're Martians?' The popular press would be so disappointed that they weren't little or green, though I could imagine a race like hers building canals without breaking a sweat.

She shook her head. 'No, no. That was already inhabited. Vulcan. On the other side of the sun.'

A scrap of memory from my college days resurfaced. 'But Vulcan

doesn't exist,' I said triumphantly. 'Einstein proved that. The astronomers worked out that they needed a planet there to account for gravitation, and then that they didn't need it after all. You can't live in a thought experiment, that's silly.'

'All right, so it doesn't exist.' She fiddled with the battle-axe she still held, awkwardly angled with the bladed end in her lap. I hoped it wasn't doing any harm to my upholstery. 'We live there, though. Tested our strength against fire demons, sang the ancient songs, all that sort of thing... .but like I said, I don't believe that we're the only source of truth in the universe. Maybe that's why I'm here and not pillaging Saks Fifth Avenue as it's my gods-given right to do.'

She paused. I wanted to ask more questions - how had they managed to survive on their world, how had the generations between that century and this one passed their time, what did they know about Earth today – but I didn't want to offend her by being too nosy. Instead I mumbled something about stopping to fuel up the tank.

'Well, as long as you're showing me the country, I'll be happy to do some looting on the side for you. No need to worry about all that silly paper money while I'm around,' Aldis offered with an impish look far younger than her age.

It looked like my clever plan to get myself home safe might be more complicated than I'd have anticipated... which is where that little incident at the gas station comes in. It'd spoilt my plans to call home from their phone booth, and when I saw a stand-alone and tried to use it, no reply came. Either something was wrong with the system or Anthony had actually gone to the office, but I could never remember that number – he disapproved of wives interrupting their husbands' work.

Dear Anthony. We'd had our ups and downs together, but no doubt he was worried sick in my absence. I could just hear him in our last conversation, that gruff, soft voice of his that I'd always loved. 'Gloria, one of these days you're going to get yourself into trouble on those roadtrips.'

'You say that every year,' I'd retorted, tidying up the cedar chest now I'd finished packing my travel clothes. 'I've been doing this for more than a quarter century now, even before Eisenhower ever put in all those highways, and I've never come to harm yet.'

'There was that time you got pickpocketed, wasn't there?'

'I don't know how many times I've told you, there's every chance I

simply misplaced the money, or even left an extra bill with the waitress by mistake. And that wasn't New York, it was Indiana. Not a big city, a roadside diner.'

'Where you wouldn't have been if you'd been home with me, would you?' He'd pulled himself out of bed and groaned as he rummaged for something beneath. I guessed he was looking for his slippers. Instead he prodded me on the back and handed me a neatly wrapped box, with a pink ribbon on it.

'What's this?'

'Open it and find out instead of asking silly questions, why don't you?'

I tore off the bright red paper without a second thought, pulling the lid off to find as nice a pair of black gloves as I'd ever seen at the local Woolworths (I've seen nicer in New York, of course, but that's hardly a fair comparison). They were soft, light kid leather, just my size.

'If you must take out the new convertible, and I still say you should take the coupe instead, you'll want a pair of good gloves like that. They'll keep your hands soft even in a tough wind. Just what you need.'

Which, honestly, they weren't – too fragile for anything but showing off, and I was more anxious about having a firm grip on the wheel than how my hands looked. A replacement for my battered old driving cap would have been more to the point. But then he always drove whenever we went anywhere, so he wasn't to know that. 'Why, Anthony, that's so sweet. They'll be the first thing I put on tomorrow.'

'Maybe I'll stay and watch you do it,' he'd said.

He hadn't, of course – whatever time I rose the day of the summer trip, he'd always left for the office even earlier, as though my absence was more tolerable than my exit. The gloves had been buried in my pocketbook – I'd play the part and tell him how useful they'd been when I returned, and how thoughtful he'd been for thinking of a gift I'd never use. Our life usually went like that.

Meanwhile, I played it safe for dinner by demonstrating a drivethrough restaurant (good old-fashioned hamburgers and sodas – Aldis was childishly delighted with the bubbles in a Coke), but the prospect of a motel caused me some slight trepidation. She professed herself willing to carry her armour in instead of wearing it as a token of good will, but the battle-axe was apparently an

unavoidable necessity. I didn't quite trust her not to pay the bill by running it through the cash register and claiming the motel in Odin's name. So another cunning plan – stop at an anonymous looking place with exterior doors and a central office (the 'Dreamy Hemlocks'). Point at a second story window, ask if Aldis could possibly do me a favour by carrying up all the suitcases and hat boxes, and hope that my New York shopping (not a spree, more a burst) had been sufficiently involved that she'd still be carrying it all up while I nipped in and out of the office.

It turned out to be a waste of effort – the clerk wore such a glazed, blissful expression that a troop of berserking warriors probably wouldn't have stymied him. I hesitated about getting only one room when he told me there were no double beds, but then I did want to keep an eye on Aldis, didn't I?

It was a less than distinguished room, as it turned out. Orange-brown bedspreads, alternating green squares of stubby threadbare carpet, hideous floral curtains apparently designed by someone who'd never seen a real bouquet in his life. A couple of cheap pastoral landscapes on the walls. About par for the course: as long as the fan turned on and the water in the shower was cold, I'd be satisfied. Anthony had asked me once how I could stand sleeping in these tacky places when our own house was so neat and well-appointed.

'Well, it makes a bit of a change, you see,' I'd begun, and trailed off when I realised I wasn't too sure what was appealing about them myself. Of course, he hadn't understood.

'You know, it looks just perfect,' Aldis said delightedly. 'So much brighter and more colourful in real life than on your TV broadcasts. I thought it'd have been much more toned down.'

So she was familiar with television, somehow? They certainly were up-to-date.

I put a quarter into the television meter and lay down on the bed to watch as she wandered around, exclaiming at the soap and coat hangers before laboriously removing her equipment. It was well after Walter Cronkite's usual fifteen minutes, but they were still doing news footage, live from California and New York. The sense of the surreal that had been haunting me all day only strengthened – we avidly watched the shots of broken Madison Avenue windows and wooden ships even larger than the ones I'd seen dwarfing the Golden Gate Bridge. The Department of Transportation had

temporarily shut down all airplane flights, to avoid accidents. President Kennedy appeared with his arm awkwardly wrapped around a great hulking berserker who grinned hugely at the camera, to tell us that we were in talks with 'the men from space' and all possible efforts were being made to find a friendly solution. It might have been rather deflating if I was the flag-waving sort. Myself, I was rather charmed that little John had crept in somehow and was playing on the rug with a huge helmet while our new world leader pontificated.

Aldis wiggled out of her confining tunic with a satisfied grunt and sat down by me on the bed, wrestling hard to pull off her boots. She still clutched her battle-axe. 'That's old Brosa. Great windbag – he calls himself king but nobody cares what he says. I'm sure he's only there because he hopes people will notice him.'

'Well, he's probably succeeded in that ambition at least... but how organised is all this, then? I mean, it looks for all the world as if you'd just landed ships anywhere you wanted and started looting.' Some nice man would have appreciated a body like that, I considered. Nice firm figure and good lines, especially for her age. Funny that she'd not talked about a husband or lover, but who knew what passed for etiquette with Víkingrs?

'Oh, it's not quite as wild as it looks on screen. I'm surprised there isn't more coverage from other countries, though. These are only American locations, aren't they?' She popped the boot and sock off, wiggled her toes in the air, and set to work on the other.

'They probably can't get in touch. We had a communications satellite in orbit last year that could have done that, but it went out of commission. The Russians might have shot it down or something.' I shifted over to give her more room on the bed. Kennedy was saying now that cooperation with all Vikings was highly recommended, and that the government was considering all options for the protections of the citizenry, including martial law. Not a surprise, I supposed.

'None of my cohort will be on, then, they're mostly in Europe. Although there's one, Hekja, who insisted that she was going to... Florida? Cod? One of those long skinny peninsulas, it was well out of the way.'

I envisioned the ruction that someone like Aldis could make at Hyannis Port and stifled a smile. Surely, it wasn't some tinge of mischievous glee that inspired my next words, merely honest civic

pride.

'Well, ' I said, 'it's only a little thing, but my hometown has a Viking stone, you know. In the town museum. They found it – oh, years ago, before I was born, it had runes on it that were supposed to prove that there'd been Viking colonisers there before Columbus. If you've heard of Columbus... might be worth a look, anyway.' Maybe there was a way to parlay this into something more. 'You know, it might be worth your spending a little time having a look, when we get there. I'd be glad to have you as a houseguest.' Anthony might be a little huffy, but it couldn't hurt to keep her around. So far all the reported casualties were gun-owners who'd shot at Víkingrs, but if negotiations broke down, or riots started... I didn't like to think.

'I may take you up on that, then. It'd fit with the skalds I told you about. I'm sure I can remember one or two.'

Aldis frowned in the way you do when you're recalling, absently laid down the axe she'd been hugging, and started singing a tune to herself right there in bed. It wasn't fine, fancy music – nothing you'd pay money to listen to, no siren call that would have charmed away the minds of men or anything, but something in her voice caught and held me. Higher and sweeter than usual, catching notes that she'd sung for years, just the same as if I'd decided to sing old familiar church hymns. I couldn't understand a word of it, but at the time it didn't seem to matter. It might have been a lullaby.

'That was very good,' I said when she had finished.

'Thank you,' she said, rolled over and went promptly to sleep.

The complete lack of awkwardness should have been a relief. Somehow it wasn't. I took a very long, very cold shower and contemplated calling Anthony again, but second-guessed myself. By now he'd probably already be thinking the worst, and if something did happen to me before I made it back, raising his hopes now would have been terribly cruel. Better to wait and let him see me in the flesh. Besides, it would probably rouse Aldis.

We took it slowly the next day, what with one thing and another. I had a bit of a fright when two police cars near the Ohio border unobtrusively flanked me, then turned on the sirens. Had I overrun the speed limit? Were they under orders to arrest Víkingrs? Aldis wouldn't take that well at all...

So I pulled over, but kept the engine running – the cop with the fanciest uniform jumped out, and, heaven help me, saluted the two

of us. 'What is it, officer?'

'Well... well, there's orders from Washington, you see. In the interests of maintaining peace, all of us police are supposed to help out any of these Vikings we see. We'd be glad to do it, ma'am. Sort of an honour guard.'

'Guard?' Aldis started. 'Well, it's very kind of you... but you really can't think we're in any danger, do you? I mean, I'm quite well equipped to protect the two of us from anything that might come along.'

He eyed her narrowly. 'Uh, I'm sure you can.' Then, turning his attention back to me: 'We'd still like to talk with you, ma'am. If you need any help to get to where you're going, perhaps. Anything we can do at all, you just say the word.'

'Ah. Hmm. No, don't worry about it, officer, we'll be just fine. I know exactly where I'm going.' I fished a handful of maps from the back seat and waved them illustratively. 'See? No trouble, we'll just be on our way.'

'We're sure you can,' he said quickly. 'But maybe you could still come down to the police station with us, ma'am. We'd like to talk to you, maybe ask you one or two things about what you're doing, how you came to meet up with... um, foreign nationals. It's all for your protection, you understand.'

'A no is a no,' Aldis said lazily, and flourished her battle-axe; it came to a halt just in front of the officer's neck. 'You won't need to be told a third time, will you?'

He drew something from his holster, but by the time he'd pulled it out I'd pressed the accelerator pedal so hard my tires squealed; in seconds we were half a mile away. I was positive that every police car in the state would be chasing after us, and it wasn't until considerably later that I came to realise they weren't coming after all. Perhaps they were as afraid of encountering us again as I'd been of them. Aldis had simply shrugged and began poring over my discarded maps. I wondered whether she could read them.

'Aldis, you shouldn't do things like that,' I said eventually. 'It doesn't do to scare officers of the law.'

She stopped humming along with the radio. 'Oh, I wasn't particularly interested in him. He was just being a nuisance, and the way you sped off I thought you found him as dull as I did. Why, did they bother you?'

Cross-purposes: I hadn't especially felt like being handed a mound

of paperwork, but that was far from the point. 'He thought you were going to kill him,' I said primly.

'Would that be such a terrible thing?' she inquired lightly. 'We are raiding your planet, it might happen. What would you do if I did?' Sunlight sparkled in her eyes; for all I could tell, the question might have been rather less than facetious. Greying hair and laugh lines aside, I'd no doubt she could do as she claimed.

'Turn myself in, I suppose,' I said, quickly. 'As an accessory to murder. I'm a regular patriotic US citizen, after all.'

'Is it only your armed forces you're telling me to look out for? I wouldn't go out of my way to loot them, if that's what you're asking. Not profitable. Unless they've looted someone else first, then it'd be useful.'

'That's not what I meant at all. I just – I don't want any death, that's all.'

'So you're afraid,' Aldis said gently. 'I guessed as much. You're afraid of this whole invasion, as well you might be, even afraid of me a little, though you hide that well enough. You want looking after, but you don't want to have death on your hands.'

I felt rather than saw her grasp my shoulder: my eyes were firmly fixed on the highway ahead. 'Maybe you call it fear; *I* call it principled. It's not as if I need a killer in my car, you know. I can stop it right now and let you out.'

She laughed and slapped me heartily. 'Now that's some spirit! All right, a pact. If anything should happen, I'll see if I can handle it without spilling blood. For someone of my skill it shouldn't be much of a challenge.'

Part of me wanted to get away from her, from the possibility of seeing even that level of violence, but the quickest way to ensure that was getting home as quickly as possible. And I was more afraid of not making it home at all, as uninspiring a sentiment as that was. 'I think I'd best take the backroads after this,' I said neutrally. 'Stay out of the way of the highway patrols.'

After thirty years of driving this route I knew plenty of strange little sideshows and cute knickknacks shops on the back roads as well as the highway, and I did want to keep my half of the bargain with Aldis. Fortunately for both of it was tourist season; Kennedy's pleas that we cooperate with the new order did less to smooth things over than my cash, I thought. Someone would ask her to demonstrate some fighting moves, she'd enthusiastically oblige, a

crowd would gather, celebrity hunters begged for pictures (Polaroids delighted her – I ended up buying one for her to try out, later), and delighted store owners pressed free goodies on us before erecting 'PATRONIZED BY THE VIKINGS' signs.

It was strangely peaceful. Anthony had never cared to accompany me on my annual pilgrimage before, so my trips had always been solo ventures. It'd never bothered me before, when I usually appreciated a little quiet time. With Aldis, though, it was different; I had someone to talk to, someone to show off the experience I'd accumulated over so many trips, appreciate the little assumptions about American life that spiced the journeys for me. Odd license plates, roadside fudge, absurd popular songs that I'd have scorned in front of Anthony but enjoyed on my car radio. All the paraphernalia that's never important enough to talk about abstractly, but when lived through with another person, becomes a warmly comfortable pattern. She drank it all in thirstily.

Aside from the occasional longship silently rowing overhead, there was no sign of invasion in the little towns we passed through – the locals were unconcerned about attack, confident that as long as the Víkingrs were still busily looting the coastal cities they were fairly safe. 'Stands to reason, doesn't it?' a soda jerk pointed out as he fixed us gooey chocolate milkshakes. 'All those big banks and fancy houses for them to go after. I heard on the radio yesterday that they didn't even stay in Russia for more than a day; there wasn't anything worth the looting. Goes to show how well they treat their people, doesn't it?'

'Nonsense,' a gentleman down the counter called out. I gave him a look and found myself returning for another – just on the cusp of middle age but still easy on the eyes for all that. Not too tall, soft black hair with a slight curl in front, nicely tailored suit - there was a certain elegance to his gestures, even in doing something simple as cutting up his slice of apple pie. He looked a little like Cary Grant in 'North By Northwest', and I found myself chuckling at the resemblance. 'You can be sure they're busy raiding the Party's dachas. There's no ruling class in history that can resist the urge to sock away a little something.'

'Like you, professor?' some wit called out. People laughed and turned back to the real topic of conversation, the latest baseball game (those had carried on as usual, as no Víkingr had cared a jot about them. I suspect that did as much to keep the country peaceful

as anything). The gentleman had now caught my eye, however – he slid his plate down and took the stool next to mine.

'Am I to take it that you two lovely ladies are travelling together?'

'It's not precisely your business if we are or not.'

'My sincerest apologies, of course.'

'You're right, though. Mrs. Anthony Carson,' I said automatically. 'Gloria Carson. The lady to my left is named Aldis.'

Aldis waved cheerfully at him, leaned her battle-axe against the counter for a moment, and spouted off a wave of ornately indecipherable language at him. She'd done that trick more than once – I suspected that she amused herself occasionally by saying complete gibberish instead of her native language, but of course I couldn't tell.

'My name is Henry – Alfred Henry... you know, you both look very trustworthy. I wonder if I might ask where you're going? In the general confusion, I've lost my transportation, and I'm still far from my intended location.'

'Oh, we're probably nowhere near where you're going. Rural Minnesota. Not quite the most fascinating place in the world, I have to admit.'

'Is he a hitchhiker?' Aldis asked. 'One of the truckers told me about them yesterday, said that they'd be a danger to most women but he doubted I'd find that a problem.' Her mouth quirked. 'Sounds like it might be fun to help him out.'

For a moment he looked angry, but his face quickly smoothed over into patience. 'As it happens, I do have friends in Minnesota. That would be ideal for me, if not too troublesome for you. Of course, I would remunerate you for your effort.' He displayed a hefty wallet.

'But Aldis, I've already got a hitchhiker,' I protested. 'See? You?'

'Well, if you're worried...' she drawled. Henry called over the soda jerk and paid off our bill before I could stop him. I considered the low state of my pocketbook and decided it was worth the risk. Certainly, I wasn't in any physical danger from him as long as Aldis was around.

The arrangement didn't last long.

For one thing, Henry preferred the news channels to the music we'd been listening to all trip, which meant endless, and tedious, political speeches. Someone in Washington had finally cottoned on

that Brosa had no real authority. Kennedy and the other world leaders were trying to establish some type of governance structure – Iceland's representatives had proposed a Thing (to my utter confusion until Aldis explained it was a little like Congress), but negotiations were in chaos due to the problems determining representatives, location... oh, everything. The Víkingrs themselves didn't seem to care that much what government was in charge, as long as they could produce plenty of luxury goods suitable for looting. Japan was already retooling their entire economy towards manufacturing Víkingr-themed products, while the Soviet Union was debating whether to call itself Russia again – something about the Rus being an old Norse tribe.

What surprised me most was an item about how the Víkingrs had ordered the destruction of all nuclear weapons, effective six months from now – the newscaster was dubious about whether this could be done, but I perked up.

'Well, there wasn't any other way to handle weaponised atomics,' Aldis explained. 'I'm a trained warrior, I'll take on any armed opponent and trust to my reflexes even if there's a gun involved, but you can't enjoy your hard-earned winnings in a world saturated with radiation. We'll be banning most of that military hardware you have, eventually. If it's not hand to hand combat, it's neither fair nor reasonable.'

'Neither is invading our planet, is it?' Henry shook his head.

'It was a religious dictate, just like those Crusades of yours.' She'd made a point of talking about 'we' and 'us' since Henry had started firing questions at her, I noticed. Plus she wasn't giving him quite the same explanations as I'd heard...' In a few months we'll have more loot than we know what to do with, but we'll have to go on the occasional raid just for the sake of respecting the gods. And you've no idea how attractive all these fancy capitalist goods really are until you've lived on a planet that's practically all rock. Why, we don't even have plastic.'

'Back me up here, Mrs. Carson. Tell her that civilised people – civilised humans – wouldn't consider themselves morally justified in attacking an entire planet just so they can take our Frigidaires and Bakelite radios.'

'I'm the driver. I'm staying strictly out of this,' I said firmly. There was no point holding opinions about controversial subjects you couldn't affect, I'd always thought – it wore you out pointlessly,

when your energy might have been better spent on something nice and practical like pie-making instead. That was something Anthony and I had always agreed on.

'But you Americans do so many things that you wouldn't consider morally justified, either,' Aldis said slyly. And they carried on quarrelling in a good-natured fashion, while I pondered the globe's new freedom. It'd been a long time since that vague fear of incoming catastrophe hadn't been more or less justified – back in the '20s, it must have been, before the Depression, Communism, Hitler, A-bombs. Anthony had kept me feeling safe all those years, with his gruff refusal to believe that anything could ever really hurt the US or the little house I'd kept for him. It had been very soothing.

Now, unbelievably, there was no global threat to fear any more. Seemed far less likely than the longships.

I called off the debate for dinner at a pizza parlour – Henry chivalrously insisted on paying, though he wouldn't touch the Hawaiian I ordered (who'd have thought pineapple with ham would be such a delicious combination?) Aldis sampled one slice before deciding she'd stick to the sausage too. Their loss.

And another night in another motel. I finally got round to asking how it was that she could talk to me, and did she speak English or what? She fingered a little trefoil design on her axe. 'Some old-fashioned idea about translators. They're supposed to pick up language from the people we're dealing with. We're only able to communicate as long as we're carrying them – that way we can't drop our weapons and surrender to the enemy."

So there was a little bit of me in her weapon now. Curious, I took hold of the axe – and nearly blew my tomfool head off with it.

Aldis told me afterwards how many months of training it took to learn how to handle the electro-magnetic fields properly, and that the devices weren't built for multiple users.

Consequence: two lamps blowing out simultaneously, the curtains catching fire, and – somehow – the channel dial on the television changing of its own accord. I wish I knew how that one happened. There was a distinct crash from the outside balcony, but we were preoccupied putting out the flames and in the process I accidentally poured the ice bucket over Aldis. She shrieked.

'Oh, Aldis, I'm sorry. I really am very sorry.'

'First you hold my weapon, then you pour ice all over me? I can't let this go unchallenged, you know.'

She selected a plump pillow off the bed and threw it at me. I caught and tossed it back in one smooth motion, hitting her solidly at the waist. For a moment she stood there simply bewildered.

My face reddened. 'College sorority. I was champion pillow thrower for two years running.' Funny how easily it'd come even after all these years.

'So I was right from the start, you do have quite good warrior instincts. You just need some training up.' She retrieved the pillow. 'Were these pillow fights formalised rituals, or informal affairs?'

'Not as official as that, it tends to be impromptu - ' Whump! This time I caught and held it. She gestured impatiently. 'Go on, throw it back at me. Hard. I'd like to gauge your technique.'

I put my tongue out unconsciously and threw the pillow back underhanded. Aldis shook her head.

'You can do better than that. Come on, I want to see how hard you can hit...'

It turned into a light-hearted but perfectly serious exercise - between her knowledge of hand-to-hand combat and my tactical expertise (if there's anything I've learned how to do as a housewife, it's how to fluff pillows!), we hammered out a how-to of pillow fighting that I'd put up against any takers in the country. Purely in good fun, of course. We had a fine time, laughing through most of it, and I've never slept better in my life.

Next morning, relaxed and cheerful, we went down to the restaurant together. I relished a biddy board, while Aldis ventured doughnuts, bacon and egg (to my horror, she stacked it up into a sandwich, piled it with ketchup, and bit into it with every evidence of delight). Henry showed up halfway through, looking distinctly worse for wear and ordering only black coffee. Not a morning person, I guessed.

Indeed, we'd not been on the road more than half an hour or so when he groaned and asked if we could pick up a bottle of aspirin. By the time I'd found a drug store he'd stretched out in the back seat and gone to sleep.

'I'll run in and get a bottle, if you like.' Aldis offered. 'I know you'd rather not leave the car when he's in it.'

'You're right, but how – '

'You wouldn't let him drive. Don't worry about it. I'll even pay at

the counter if you like.'

I peeled off a few bills. 'Might as well get a few sodas while you're at it. Take your time, we're not in a hurry.'

The moment she was safely inside, Henry revived quite remarkably. 'Now that we're alone, Mrs. Carson, are you quite certain you're well? She doesn't have you under any kind of restraint? No psychological threats? Intimidation? Torture?'

'Why. Nothing of the sort. Whatever gave you that idea?'

'If you don't mind me saying so, you are a vulnerable, older woman, and I would hate to leave you alone with a trained killer. From what I can tell, you've been travelling for days in her company, and not a single person has questioned whether it's under duress? I love our country, Mrs. Carson, but sometimes its inhabitants do seem so... trusting.'

It was an effort not to giggle, but I managed. 'Goodness, no. If anything, she's been playing bodyguard while I show her the sights. Aldis is perfectly nice, Mr. Henry, if a little show-offy.'

He looked simply delighted. 'Well then, that's good. That's very good. So you'd say that she's relatively pleasant, as these aliens go?'

'I did just say that.'

'Pleasant enough for me to get to know her better, perhaps?'

'Are you asking—'

'I'll confess to being curious, Mrs. Carson. And alien or not, she is very lovely. Perhaps you could help arrange for me to be... alone, with her, for a few hours?' He pressed a bill of an appallingly high-denomination into my pocketbook. 'Money no object. I can afford any little luxury she might desire, and there would be some compensation for you, of course.'

I pondered the scene. Imagined this rich, handsome man sweeping Aldis away, showing her the country in proper Hollywood style. He'd probably have some far fancier car to escort her across the country – no, they'd travel by train, of course, in private luxury rather than the public highway. Taking expensive meals in the dining car, walking away hand-in-hand as the train rocked, admiring its speed and silence, examining the private sleeping berths. Oh yes, undoubtedly she'd love all that.

Aldis came out, the sodas in her free hand, and caught sight of my face. I felt rather silly all of a sudden. She was more likely to want to loot a chandelier than have someone whisper soft nothings to her underneath one.

'Mr. Henry, I think I'd like you to leave now,' I said feebly.

Aldis didn't ask questions, just walked over to the backseat to open the door; I twisted round to look at them. 'Well, that's simple enough. I've promised Gloria here to avoid hurting people, so be nice and leave quietly.'

'But I was only saying, how much I enjoy your company. How beautiful you are, for a start.' He reached out for a fond fondle.

I winced as Aldis gracefully sidestepped the embrace and rammed the back of his skull with the flat of her blade. She passed me the bottles; I sat quietly drinking soda while she dragged his groggy weight out of the backseat single-handedly.

'Having bested you,' she said cheerfully, 'I'm entitled to the profits of victory. It's my first looting, I hope you're worth it.'

He groaned. 'Is there any chance of those aspirins?'

Mr. Henry's suit pockets were deep and hefty, just the sort I'd always envied Anthony, but the more we pulled out the more I wondered how he'd stuffed everything in there. Cigarettes. Boy Scout pocket knife. Fat wallet, including what looked very much like an FBI badge – he couldn't be really, could he? A Mardi Gras mask carved out of antlers. Old-fashioned turnip pocket watch, a nasty paperweight of a spider wrapped around a snake, prophylactics, one serene turtle (it waddled away to the southwest), squashy candies in a white paper bag, duct tape, three road maps of Utah, and finally a hatpin, a rather gorgeous one with some ruby-coloured stone set in the top. I plucked it up and stuck it in my driving cap at a jaunty angle – he made a grab for it but Aldis put a firm knee where it wasn't desired and thrust him back down again.

'I think it's about time I treated you to dinner, Gloria,' Aldis said with much enthusiasm. 'With all this cash here, just begging to be spent.'

'Why, Aldis, what a wonderful idea. Dinner, then perhaps a little quiet time, alone in our motel room together. Yes, that sounds marvellous.'

Mr. Henry looked up at us with wide eyes. He was probably imagining scenarios far more indecorous than interplanetary gossip and pillow fights. Honi soit qui mal y pense, my college professors would have said.

I smiled sweetly at him as I put the car in gear. 'Come along, Aldis dear.'

She gave him one last firm kick for good measure, and my Wildcat

thrummed away, leaving Mr. Henry far behind.

'There still wasn't a need for violence there,' I said.

'What kind of country is this, where a man thinks he can wrap himself around you whenever he likes? By my lights, that was simply self-defence. Most uncivilised.'

'In a way, fighting others just to take their possessions makes more sense to me. There's probably not a woman in the country who hasn't had an unexpected squeeze one time or another. I'd have worried about going anywhere near you, if I'd known you'd react to it that strongly.' Of all the reasons for Aldis getting into a fight at last, a cultural misunderstanding? If something this simple could lead to conflict, I might well worry about the fate of the country at large.

'Ah,' she said, with a mischievous look. 'Then it's lucky we have an understanding now, isn't it?'

I'm an old lady. It'd been a long time since I had occasion to blush.

At long last, we made it home the next noon – I dropped Aldis off at the town museum, where she could have a look at the Kensington Stone. After a moment of hesitation, I gave her directions to my house. There was a lot to talk about with Anthony, but I'd seen her this far. I could at least put her up in the spare bedroom for one night, before she made her own arrangements.

Maple Street. Thick glossy leaves such as you never see in New York streets. Home again.

I scrabbled in my pocketbook for the little pink scoubidou tied to my house key, and unlocked the front door, not a little of the enthusiasm at my long-awaited return ebbing at its reality. The house smelt terribly of Chesterfields, for one; I'd left cans of Glade in the bathroom in the hope Anthony might remember to use them this year, but no such luck. The kitchen was a disaster area – a fortnight's worth of Tupperwares from suppers I'd frozen in advance were stacked haphazardly in the sink, to say nothing of cereal bowls and beer bottles left lying about. Mud all through the halls, laundry in every possible receptacle, and the less said about the bathroom the better.

It was the flipside of my annual vacation – the house simply went to pieces – and usually I'd spend a few days getting it all tidy again. But a lot was going to happen this evening that I didn't want to think about, and that's the best encouragement for housework, I've

always found. You can dig into the mopping or the bread kneading and give no heed to what's troubling you, if you're determined enough. I swept, I dusted, I doused everything with Windex, relishing the familiar chemical scent. I even found time to chop up the rest of those Baldwins for my special apple pie with extra-buttery pastry. Pity we'd run out of topping. I made a note to run out and get some, if I had time.

The doorbell rang, later that afternoon. I rushed to open it, expecting my husband with a mixture of fondness and trepidation.

Instead it was Mr. Henry. He strode into my kitchen without so much as a by-your-leave, poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot I'd just brewed hot for Anthony.

'Nice to see you again, Mrs. Carson. Now, I won't bear you a grudge for last time – under the circumstances I can very well understand your fear and helplessness, and I may have chosen the wrong tone with you - but the time has come for you to declare your loyalties.'

'What... what loyalties? How did you even get here?'

'I have my methods. And I know you have my credentials – which I'd like back, by the way. I am a fully authorised agent of the government, Mrs. Carson, and just now my mission involves your previous travelling companion. I'd like your help arresting her.'

'She's not here.'

'But she can't be that far away, in a small town like this.' He allowed a moment to pass; I stayed silent. 'Must I go over your head and wait for your husband to come home? I'd feel obliged to tell him the full story then, and he might not like to hear you've been consorting with the enemy.'

I gazed at him, bewildered. He sighed, and pulled a packet of photos out of his pocket. 'I took the liberty of bugging the Viking's room, only it seems to have been yours as well. Rather compromising, I must say. I can't imagine Mr. Carson would be any too pleased.'

'That was entirely innocent,' I protested. 'Nothing untoward at all, just a few... .pillow fights.' I trailed off; it sounded ridiculous even to myself.

'That so? Funny thing is, I believe you. Without that female harpy around, you strike me as the mild, inoffensive type. The sort who may grumble about her husband a little, now and again, but wouldn't dream of life without him. Yes, the very picture of a nice

quiet housewife.'

'Anthony's always thought so.'

'But I'll tell him the honest truth, that while I was investigating I was hit with some type of very painful electrical feedback. It's clear to me that one of you was expecting some sort of surveillance. He can draw his own conclusions about what you were up to.'

I remembered the odd thump that night and almost giggled at the thought of this secret agent man falling off the balcony, then sobered. Since money hadn't worked, now he was trying blackmail. 'You're just jealous because you wanted Aldis for yourself,' I blurted out, quite indelicately.

He choked on the coffee. 'Jealous for a godforsaken alien monster? I want to kill her, not make love to her!'

'Oh? You all but told me that was exactly what you wanted to do!'

'All right, I was lying.' He slammed the cup down on the table, so hard that the ceramic cracked; it was an ivory Fiesta cup, which they didn't make any more, and I felt a stab of anger. 'I know how to get rid of these Vikings, but I've got to get one alone to study it first. Since the invasion started, I've been trying to arrange it, but they're obviously hard to catch, and I'm on a time limit.'

'If you're a real government agent, with a real plan for getting rid of them, Washington would be throwing money and men at you. You wouldn't need to be out here chasing after one tourist.' I watched carefully for his reaction. 'So either you were carrying around fake credentials for some reason, or... no, I get it. You're a former agent, aren't you?'

'My methods were a little too unorthodox for Hoover's tastes. But you needn't fear about my loyalties. I'll save this country from itself if it kills me.' He looked more like Cary Grant than ever, the mistrusted but passionate agent ready to save the day alone. I didn't disbelieve him.

'So what's your wonderful plan for getting rid of a whole fleet of space invaders?' I glanced at the clock. This sounded like it might take a while.

'It's an odd truth, but the larger the potential impact of an alien incursion, the more malleable it is for temporal reversal. I have access to certain rituals, certain techniques, for dealing with such supernatural phenomenon. They've protected the United States since the Founding Fathers, and they'd be working perfectly well now if my government department, which used to handle these

matters unobtrusively, hadn't been recently let go.' He actually chuckled. 'Let's just say that the McCarthy witch hunts were a little more literal than most of the public knew. You may have noticed that public awareness of aliens have increased exponentially in the last few years – well, that never would have happened if we were still on the job.'

He was babbling. 'I'd swear you just told me you're a witch.'

'A gross oversimplification, but you have the basic idea. Is that such an extraordinary claim in a world with Viking longships flying overhead?'

'Well. No.'

'Good. On to my requirements. I'll need the use of a private room – the cellar will do admirably - a box of chalk, the liver and heart of a cow, some rosemary, dried or fresh, and that hatpin you took from me. Two live chickens would be ideal, but not necessary. Oh! Mustn't forget the salt.'

'What could you possibly want –'

He raised a finger. 'You wouldn't understand, don't waste breath asking. Just find Aldis, bring her here, and I'll take care of the rest myself. After that you can rest easy. The US flag will be flying over an unconquered nation again, and it'll all have been because of you. It will never have happened in the first place.'

'You mean... I'll just forget?'

'Everyone will forget. You'll go back to being an innocent housewife. No more looting, no more Vikings, you'll have had a nice quiet trip back from New York. Loving reconciliation with your husband. Now how does that sound?'

'I can do it. That shopping list won't take me more than half an hour, then I can pick up Aldis, I know where she is. Be glad to have this settled once and for all,' I said quickly.

'Good girl. Hop to it.' Honest to goodness, he tossed off a salute.

I grabbed my pocketbook and walked out to the convertible, heart pounding. Methodically, I went out to my butcher's to purchase the requested organs (he congratulated me on having reached home safely; I'm afraid my reply was a little listless). Methodically I drove to the grocery for the chalk and salt; there would be rosemary in my herb garden already, I knew. It was when I was on the road to the local poultry farmer, and wondering how to transport two chickens home alive that the absurdity of the situation dawned on me. I pulled over and settled down to think.

There was no earthly reason why the fate of the world should be put in my hands. I was just a simple housewife, I didn't deserve this.

Maybe it wasn't, maybe Mr. Henry could find some other Víkingr who'd satisfy his requirements. No – he'd said he didn't have long, hadn't he? How much time did he have? Perhaps not that much; if he'd chased after Aldis and I instead of heading for the coastal cities, that suggested urgency measured in days or even hours. Or something about her in particular that made her a good test subject?

I dug the FBI badge from where we'd stowed it in the glove compartment, playing with the pin as I thought. No: even if it wasn't, I had to act as if the world's fate did rest on my shoulders. Help Mr. Henry do... something to the Víkingrs – drive them off? Kill them? Something horrible, or he could have told me what it was. That was a point. I couldn't trust that everything he said was true. He might be simply mad, or mistaken or lying.

But that didn't change the basic choice I had to make. Hand over Aldis, and I'd never have to think about any of this ever again. No slightly disloyal feeling that we were better off under the new regime. No running into gas station attendants so frightened that they'd point guns at their own children, no fears of unexpected death. Anthony would be only too glad to return to normalcy, I knew that without asking. As for me, I could let Anthony take over the thinking again, head back to my regular routine of tidying and baking. It'd be all normal again. As a reasonably patriotic American – I'd been living here all my life, I was rather fond of the place – my duty was clear. I wouldn't even know what I'd missed.

While against that... Mr. Henry had been right that I'd been frightened, but I found the new world exhilarating too. Granted that we couldn't trust the Víkingrs, that there was no knowing what might happen in future, it was still the case that they'd banished the spectre of real global annihilation. And more than that... if the general reaction to Aldis had been anything to go by, I wasn't the only one who found the new situation, with anarchy let loose at last and not even the experts controlling what would happen tomorrow, something of a relief. After so many years expecting the worst, finding that doomsday had finally come – and that it wasn't quite as terrifying as we'd all be warned– was vastly preferable to the tension of waiting. It was like a long-awaited thunderstorm breaking at last.

While Aldis tells me that the rest of it was dilly-dallying and excuse-making, and that the real issue came down to one simple question – was it her or Anthony I wanted to spend the rest of my life with?

And while I hate to think that the whole course of the world could be decided by something so comparatively trivial, so unimportant, as a woman's love affairs, here's the thing: she's quite possibly right.

Aldis was gossiping happily with the museum curator when I found her, but something of my concern must have communicated itself to her; I'd barely said hello when she politely claimed an urgent errand and excused herself, virtually dragged me out the door. We were in the Wildcat in moments.

'Gloria, what's wrong? Are you all right?'

I thought about that. 'Fine. Better than I've been in a long time. Aldis, you should probably know that Mr. Henry's looking for you.'

'Is he?'

'In fact, he's trying to kill you. Probably both of us, by the time he realises I've run out on him. We'll have to skip town. And also, the world might be ending unexpectedly any day now.'

'Only way to live, they say. So we're going out on the road again? I'd have liked to have taken a closer look at those runes, but it'll still be there when another Víkingr comes along.' She smiled warmly at me. 'If the world does end, I can't imagine anyone I'd rather be with.'

I grinned sheepishly back. 'Uh-huh. I've just got to make one phone call, then we'll be off. With luck we can cross the border before stopping for the night. I've never driven to the other coast before, I've no idea.'

We found a phone booth twenty miles out of town and Aldis stood guard outside, while I thumbed through the book for Anthony's office. One ring, two ring, three rings, and his deep voice was asking, 'Hello? Who is this?'

'Anthony? Are you there? It's Gloria.'

'Gloria? You're alive? I'd about given up hope on you, what happened? Where are you?'

'Long story. Look, this will sound silly, but if I'd gotten myself into trouble, serious trouble, with a G-Man, what would you say?'

'So that's what's held you up? I told you you'd get into trouble on one of those crazy New York trips of yours. Thought one of these

alien thingummies must have blasted you with a ray gun, or something.'

'Not as such, but I'm on the run, and I'm probably guilty of treason, and the FBI man is waiting at the house for me to come back, so I can't. But there's just one thing I want to know right now – will you stick by me, no matter what? Whatever they say about me?' I held my breath. There was a chance, just a chance, that Anthony would come out with some romantic line about having married me for better or for worse. For sentimentality's sake, it would have been nice to hear – in any other respect it would make my life horrifyingly complicated just now.

Instead, there was a click and a dial-tone. Dear, predictable Anthony. Pity I hadn't time to tell him about buying Reddi-wip for that pie – it'd been a nice pie, and I hoped it wouldn't go to waste. Maybe he and Mr. Henry would eat it together while complaining about the failings of weak and facile women.

I went out. 'It's all right, Aldis. Nothing left to keep me here, now. He hung up.'

Aldis studied me. 'I was listening,' she admitted frankly, with no apparent shame. 'You did your best to make yourself sound as outrageous as possible, didn't you? Manipulated him into throwing you over?'

I shrugged. 'If he has any second thoughts, Mr. Henry will probably take care of that. He was blackmailing me, swore he'd say we were lovers if I didn't help kidnap you.'

She wrapped an arm around me protectively as we walked back to the car. 'There's always time to prove him right, you know.'

'Humph. One thing at a time. Do you do even dinner and a movie where you come from?'

'We did, but not with those big theatres you have – we skipped past that to personal screens right away. I think I'd prefer one of those drive-in movies, they always sounded like tremendous fun. You've still got no end of American customs to show me.'

'Just us, the Wildcat, and a twenty-foot rampaging monster on screen,' I promised. 'You'll love it. There's supposed to be a wonderful one about Greek myths airing right now...'

And that's the story of how a dumpy middle-aged housewife went out and found herself, quite by accident. I'd like to say it all ends happily, but to be honest, I don't know that yet. The new Víkingr-enforced nuclear accords may be more fragile than we're told, and

there's always the chance of some ill-advised counterattack. Mr. Henry might figure out how to turn the clock back and restore the Cold War America we all knew.

But for now, it's simple enough – two women, travelling across the country together, very much in love.

I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Playing For Time VII

Bubble 283

The mathematics ran continuously, painfully in Tefen's head. When you got to the end of the algorithm and looked back, it all seemed so simple, so obvious, but then when it started over again, counting from a new moment in time, it was gruelling. If he hadn't had the makeover in the tank, he thought, he might not have been able to handle it at all.

'Are you all right, Tefen?' said Chrys, passing him in one of the dining bubbles. 'You look like you're trying to digest a camel.'

It was all he could do to bring the word to mind. 'Migraine,' Tefen said, and took his bed for two days.

Goddamn smug smartarse angel.

By the third day the constant turnover of equations had subsided to a distracting earworm, a constant awareness of the number of bubbles in the ship now, and in an hour's time, and tomorrow. He only had to wait two more days for the right moment.

Quiver came to see him, surprising him. These days he tried to keep out of everyone's way as much as possible. 'I heard you were dying, man,' he said.

Tefen, sitting up his bed, shrugged. 'Nothing serious. It's just cagastric.'

'Oh, okay,' said Quiver uncertainly, leaning against the dressing table, his panda eyes idly scanning the corners of the room. 'I thought maybe it was the red weed.'

There are scarier things than the red weed. Tefen was astonished by the thought. He couldn't bring himself to tell Quiver that.

'I brought that on myself, remember,' said Tefen.

'Yeah,' said Quiver. 'I guess you had to learn the hard way?'

'Oh,' said Tefen, 'I guess I still have a lot to learn.'

'I hope it's worth it, man.'

He followed the numbers rattling in his head to the door of the two hundred and eighty-third bubble.

The *door*? It was barely half a metre across. What the hell? Was it designed for aliens the size of squirrels? Or angels small enough to dance on the head of a pin? He couldn't be sure about many things

about the ship, even now, but one thing he was sure of was that the size of a door was commensurate with the size of the bubble on the other side. So the room where, supposedly, all the greatest treasures somehow accumulated could only be – the maths began to grind in his head like cogs – *stop that!* Small. Too small to get inside.

He sighed. Might as well take a look. He poked the door, right in the centre, and when it opened he thrust his hand inside.

Life of Julia
Tansy Rayner Roberts

The Roman Empire, which for a long time had been unsettled and, as it were, drifting, through the usurpation and violent death of three Emperors, was at last taken in hand and given stability by the Flavian family. Their house was obscure and without family portraits, yet our country had no reason whatever to be ashamed of them.

The reputation of Emperor Vespasian was so high that his agreement to tolerate the overnight incursion of the new visitors in no way damaged the esteem in which he is held by the Roman people.

As to his sons, Titus and Domitian inherited a Rome already conquered. What could they do under such circumstances but continue the legacy of their father, and become collaborators in their own right?

We could not fight the new visitors. They did not come with swords or armies at their back. They appeared out of nowhere, and embraced the city of Rome with a calm placidity that was greatly at odds with the usual character of the city.

– Suetonius, 'The Life of Vespasian.'[1]

1) a nice day for a white wedding

Julia Flavia had always hated her uncle Domitian.

He was the kind of man who mocked the slaves when they served him wine or olives, instead of pretending they were furniture as manners dictated. He kicked cats in the street. He sneered at everyone. There was something creepy about him, something altogether 'not right,' and she had been aware of it long before it occurred to her that everyone expected him to be her future husband.

Perhaps today was Domitian's punishment for wallowing in his privilege as Caesar and Prince of Rome. No one could say it was not deserved. Still, Julia could not find it in her to be vengeful.

Domitian sat on a fresh-skinned sheepskin, his flame-veiled bride at his side, awaiting the entrails of that same sheep to be pronounced healthy, as a sign of good fortune. The bride, the groom, their families and the priest performed every traditional ritual as if it was a genuine wedding rather than a mockery of everything that was good and real and Roman.

The bride wore her scarlet veil high upon her curled tower of hair, so that all gathered for the ceremony could see her bright white skin, her blank eyes. From her artificial fringe to her slight double chin, she was a perfect replica of a woman called Domitia Longina, with whom Domitian had once declared himself desperately in love.

She was not the actual Domitia Longina, who had been found dead of hemlock some days previously.

Domitian taunted no one during this farce of a wedding, not even when the slave tipped his ritual cup too quickly and spilled a few drops of wine on the floor. He sat there, rigid and blank-faced, speaking only when required to do so, as he was joined in matrimony with a barbarian creature from beyond the stars.

Vespasian Augustus, Emperor of Rome, declared his youngest son married, and bestowed an imperial kiss upon the cold white cheek of the bride. She looked unreal, like the raw form of a marble statue before warm paint colours were applied.

No one knew how it was that the new visitors – the Nova – were able to replicate real Romans so accurately. Would the new Domitia look more or less strange if she were painted in bright reds and blues and golds like the statues around the palace?

Julia stood beside her grandfather Vespasian, forcing her voice to be clear and genuine as she congratulated her uncle and his new wife. Domitian turned, his hand clasping that of Domitia, and led her out to greet the people of Rome.

My turn next, Julia thought miserably. Now that Domitian was not free to marry her, it was clear that she would also be cementing the 'alliance' between Roman and the new visitors with her own hand in marriage.

Would they carve her a bridegroom from marble, or build one from clay?

She was seven years old.

Vespasian did not lose his sense of humour even when in apprehension of his own death, and when the end drew near was heard to say 'Oh my, I think I am becoming a god.'

He had so much assurance in his own horoscope and those of his family members that he told the Senate either his sons would succeed him or he would have no successor. Given that the Senate was at this time formed from a small measure of Roman citizens and a larger measure of the new visitors, there were many who said indeed that he

had no successor.

The new visitors condescended to allow Titus Flavius Caesar to ascend the throne, in thrall to their wishes as his father had been.

– Suetonius, 'Life of Vespasian.'

2) nothing pure in this world

After the funeral of the Emperor Vespasian, Julia slipped away from her family and the crowds. Because her grandfather had been so set on austerity, she and the other family members had worn simple clothes to the funeral. In her tunic and woollen shawl, accompanied only by a single house slave, she looked like any other fifteen-year-old girl on the streets of Rome.

The temples were busy today. The loss of an Emperor, even a hated one, was guaranteed to send shivers of religious fervour through the city, and Vespasian was far from hated.

The clown at his funeral had danced back and forth in comic imitation of the old man, demanding to know how much the funeral had cost the city. He could chuck himself in the Tiber for a fraction of the price, he joked. There had been no bile in the performance, or in its reception. The populace genuinely mourned their soldier-emperor, the counter of coins. Vespasian's tight hand on the purse strings was the only detail they thought worthy to mock.

Had they forgotten that he was the one who allowed the Nova to conquer Rome? Or was it that the conquest been so quiet, the people themselves barely noticed it?

Julia had intended to visit the temple of Concordia-of-Women outside the city, but the streets were crowded, and she was too tired to walk so far. She headed instead for the temple of Vesta in the Forum. Marble-skinned Nova visitors stood watch at the doors, as with every popular temple.

There was nothing wrong in making a personal sacrifice to a favourite god, in honour of the late emperor. Rome was full of citizens doing exactly that. Julia took a long, slow breath, and then forced herself to walk among the women, up the steps and across the threshold of the goddess of the hearth. Her sleeve almost brushed the cold skin of one of the Nova as she passed him, and she shivered.

Vesta was a goddess of women, and so it was women who crowded in around her hearth. Julia's slave waited with others by the

doorway, ready to escort her home. She had never stood in line to sacrifice before, but she was anonymous today. Merchant's wives and soldier's mistresses greeted the goddess one at a time, and she had no wish to flaunt her status in order to go ahead of them.

Being a daughter of an Emperor was, so far, little better than being the granddaughter of an Emperor.

It was Julia's turn to cast her honey cakes into the flames. As they burned in the hearth, she stayed still on her knees, praying quietly to the good goddess. Vesta, help me. Vesta, keep me safe.

She was jostled as she made to leave, and could not see the door through the throng of women. A gentle hand seized her elbow and guided her. Relieved, Julia allowed herself to be led through a door, into an ante-room within the temple.

It was cosy, this space, with dining couches and a glorious fresco painted across the walls in murex and gold: women dancing chastely. The floor was of the finest mosaic glass and tile, depicting a braided pattern in black and white and sea-green. This must be private quarters of the Vestals.

She had been here before, for the Vestalia and other women's rituals. Once, as a child, a young Vestal had taken her hand and showed her the secret vault beneath the temple where in ancient days any priestess who broke her vows would be bricked up and left to die. Julia had hated this place ever since, for all its finery and comfortable couches.

'Daughter,' said the priestess who had led her here. She wore white, of course, all soft wool with a thick white veil covering her hair. She was young, perhaps only a year or two older than Julia herself. 'Do you seek our help?' she asked, removing her veil now. Beneath it, she wore red and white ribbons in her hair, to symbolize the sacred flame of Vesta.

'Of course not,' said Julia quickly. 'Why should I need help?'

The priestess smiled and did not answer. Instead, she summoned wine and fruit. The Chief Vestal, Licinia, joined them after a moment. She was much older woman with her own hair bound in ribbons. Julia had often watched her performing rituals for the virtue and safety of the city of the Rome.

As long as the flame burns, the city is safe.

'My child,' said the Chief Vestal, guiding Julia to a couch as slaves brought in refreshments. 'I do not think you came here to honour our fallen emperor, for all your eyes are red with a granddaughter's

tears. Tell me why you sought a temple of women today.'

'For myself,' Julia whispered. 'I am afraid. Are we alone here?'

'Quite alone,' said Licinia. 'The barbarians have never stepped over this threshold.' The edge to her voice made it clear that she did not approve of the visitors. Perhaps it would be safe, after all, to ask for help.

Julia looked at her feet. The younger Vestal brought her a cup of honey wine to sip, and it was stronger than she expected. She swallowed it down hard. 'I am to be married,' she blurted out. 'To one of them.'

'It is an abomination,' Licinia hissed. 'No live children have been born from such marriages. They seek to conquer us by owning us, one by one, and they offer nothing in return.'

'I don't know what to do,' said Julia. 'Their eyes never leave me. In the palace - my uncle's wife is everywhere and sees everything. I don't understand how we have let them rule us. Is Rome not a mighty empire?' She felt so disloyal to her father, even saying those words aloud.

'How old are you, child?' asked Licinia.

'Fifteen.'

'Old enough to marry.' It was a question as much as a statement.

'It was only delayed because of Vespasian's fever, and then his funeral. My father, the Emperor Titus, has approved the match. It is all arranged. As soon as our mourning period is done…'

'Ssh,' said Licinia, tapping her long brown fingers on the woollen palla that covered Julia's shoulder. 'It is right and proper,' she said finally. 'They did not conquer us with swords or politics with other weapons of men. The men have done nothing to rid us of this invasion, and so it is up to us to use the weapons of women.'

Julia stifled a laugh at the thought of the women of the city arming themselves with spindles and weaving looms with which to attack the Nova. It wasn't funny, not at all.

'What can we do?' she asked. 'What can I do?'

The Vestals had always had an inner strength that went above and beyond the petty politics of the city. If anyone could save her, it was these women, and Vesta herself, guardian of women.

'You will do as all daughters of the imperial house have done for generations,' said Licinia. 'You will marry, as your father and emperor commands. And you will wait for an opportunity to serve your city in other ways.'

'Is that all?' Julia choked.

'Know that the goddess and the women will be plotting against these creatures,' said Licinia. 'But it is best you do not know the work that we do.' She patted Julia again. 'Marriage to an enemy is a sacrifice, my dear, but not an insurmountable one. Women have done it for centuries.'

And Julia understood then that no one was going to save her.

A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. It is befitting a wife to worship only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all wyrd rituals and outlandish superstitions. For with no gods do the stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favour.

- Plutarch, 'Advice to Bride and Groom

3) hey, little sister, what have you done?

His name was Emah, and he claimed to be the brother of the new Domitia Longina. Julia was glad that she had not been forced through the same horrid ritual they devised for Uncle Domitian, replacing a real person he loved with a marble simulacrum. They did not even pretend by giving him a Roman name.

If Emah was based on a real citizen, Julia had never met him.

It was proper for the two of them to spend some time in each other's company before the wedding, with chaperones. House slaves stood against every wall, and Domitia Longina sat at her loom in the far corner, weaving industriously.

Her appearance of good Roman womanhood was another pretence. Julia had watched Domitia weave before, had seen the way that the stitches appeared perfectly, line after line, without her doing more than wave her fingers in the general direction of the loom.

They pretend to be like us, to be limited to our machines and devices, our ways of doing things. And yet their technology is so much greater. We are already conquered; why on earth do they go through such rituals?

But Julia was not here to observe Domitia's false work in wool; she was here to learn more about her future husband. She knew well that if she did not please him, she might be the next Roman to disappear and be replaced by a white replica.

Emah was beautiful, at least. He looked exactly like an unpainted statue of one of the younger and prettier gods.

'Shall you enjoy being married to me?' Julia asked when she ran out of neutral platitudes.

'Of course,' said Emah in that smooth voice of his. 'It is the duty and privilege of a Roman citizen to marry, and to serve the city through union with his bride.'

That almost amused her. 'Are you quoting Augustus?'

'The Nova are Romans now. We must respect the men whose thoughts and words have shaped the Empire.'

'Indeed,' Julia said sharply. 'The first Emperor had all sorts of clever thoughts about marriage. He also believed that childless marriages should be annulled. How can a husband and wife serve the state if not by having children?'

In the corner, she saw Domitia Longina raise her head from her weaving. Julia knew a warning when she saw one.

'I am concerned,' she said, wringing her hands and playing the innocent young girl that she was supposed to be. 'I have not heard that any marriage between… our new citizens and our old, has been fruitful. My father the Emperor Titus can have no heir if I do not bear children.'

'Titus has an heir, Julia,' Domitia observed from her corner. 'My husband has that honour.'

'Indeed,' said Julia with an edge to her voice she could not disguise this time. 'And I do not mean to be cruel, Domitia, but we are sisters now, and sisters can say anything to each other: where is Uncle Domitian's own heir? Who shall succeed him to the Empire?'

Emah reached out and placed his cool white hand over her own. 'Do not trouble yourself, Julia. It is for the gods to decide if we are to be blessed with children.'

She could not breathe when he touched her. It was quite terrifying, the thought that he could erase her from history like a hand swatting a fly. They must have great powers, these Nova, to have taken Rome so silently and with such force.

'Of course,' she whispered, bowing her head. 'I put all trust and faith in the gods to provide us with everything we need. Only…'

'Does something else trouble you?'

'I know so little about the Nova,' she blurted out, and saw them both tense at the use of that word, though they had been using it themselves. We are all Romans now. 'Plutarch says a wife must love

her husband's gods above all things. I know nothing of your gods.'

Domitia returned to her weaving.

Emah squeezed Julia's hand. 'My gods are the same as yours, dearest. The gods of Rome.'

Tell that to Vesta, she thought wildly as his hand slipped lower, caressing the point where her tunic gave way to bare leg. Tell it to Concordia-of-Women and the Bona Dea and Venus herself. I do not think they will believe you.

'Rome has always embraced outsiders,' Emah continued, sounding like her old schoolteacher. 'Every culture of the world has arrived here, by boat or by land, free or in chains. Rome absorbs them all, and makes them her own.'

'You make the Empire sound like a hungry monster,' said Julia, very much aware of his hand on her leg. It was an almost enjoyable sensation, and if he were human, she might have found herself catching her breath in anticipation of the wedding.

Even if the Nova had never come, I would not have chosen my own husband.

'Rome fascinates me,' said Emah. 'We read so much before we came here. We learned why this time and place was so - ripe for integration. Now here we are, barely making a ripple in time by our presence. Future generations may not even note when we arrived.'

Generations, Julia thought wildly. What generations? There shall be no children. Bearing Roman's future was the work of every woman in this city. What would be left to them without that?

'So you chose us,' she breathed. 'You knew about us before you arrived?' Time, he said, as if the Nova came from further away than another world.

'Virgil was my favourite writer,' Emah confessed. 'I argued against the reign of Vespasian. It would have made so much more sense to start at the beginning of it all, when Aeneas first stood upon this land and claimed Lavinia in marriage. Before the walls of Rome were even built.'

'Emah,' Domitia Longina said in warning.

'I am not supposed to say such things,' said Emah with that beautiful smile of his. 'Never mind. I have my own Lavinia now.' He kissed her, and Julia surrendered to the kiss.

It was not unpleasant. She wondered if she could kill him, if the gods told her she must.

The Romans have a goddess whom they call Bona… The women who celebrate her festival, cover the tents with vine-branches and place a consecrated serpent by the goddess. It is not lawful for a man to be in the house whilst the rites are celebrated, and the women by themselves perform the sacred offices ... When the festival comes, the husband, who is either consul or praetor; and with him every male creature, quits the house. The wife then sets it in order, and the principal ceremonies are performed during the night, the women playing together as they keep watch, and music of various kinds is performed.

– Plutarch, 'Life of Caesar.'

4) hey little sister, who is it you're with?

Since she was quite small, Julia had always enjoyed the women's festivals: the Bona Dea, the Matronalia, the Vestalia.

Before she died, her mother had told her how important it was that women had their own world of gods and craft and conversation and wine - that they could make decisions within this world, without asking fathers or husbands. The women of Rome will always unite behind their own kind, she told a very young Julia.

As an adult now, Julia knew that this had been a false hope. Men were not the greatest enemy, not to any woman of Rome, no matter the power they still wielded in public or private. Other women represented a far more immediate danger.

Julia's husband might all but own her body, but it was still Domitia Longina who accompanied Julia everywhere she went, her cool white eyes always watching, reporting back. Look what had happened to Annia Severina, Julia's friend since childhood. On the day of Julia's wedding, Annia had drawn her aside and whispered that if she wanted to take this last chance to escape, Annia and her brother Severinus would help her get out of Rome. Julia had considered it for one wild moment, then shaken her head to say ‘no.'

Annia and Severinus had both disappeared that night, before reaching their homes. Julia knew it had been Domitia who overheard the conversation. Who else would have been able to spy on her so thoroughly?

There was no pleasure in a festival when you feared any careless word from a friend might result in another disappearance. Julia had been determined not to attend the Bona Dea this year, especially

when she heard it was being hosted in the house of the Vestals. But Domitia took over, ordering Julia's best festival dress to be made ready with ribbons and flowers for her hair. She could not refuse.

Julia had not visited the Vestals since the day she had begged them to save her from marriage to one of the new barbarians. Even now, she felt a stab of anger as she crossed their threshold. Why had they not helped her? That was the last day she had not been watched closely. She would never escape now.

The temple was thrown open to all women, and every room was beautifully decorated for the season. As Julia entered, her arm hooked into that of Domitia Longina, she felt a chilly blast from every woman present. How must we look, she thought self-consciously. The imperial family, the rulers of Rome… traitors all.

'All women' were invited to the festival, and that included Domitia Longina, though she and Julia were obviously far from welcome. Julia wore the stola of a married woman over her short tunic, and her gold ring told the world by its symbol of clasped hands that she was married to one of the invaders.

Could they see it on her face, that she had not fought him when he came to her wedding bed, that she had submitted to her husband just as she had always submitted to every order given to her by her father and grandfather?

Roman women have always collaborated with our conquerors. It is our way.

Julia deserved those suspicious looks as much as her marble-white sister Domitia. As she reached for a glass of honey wine, she felt rather than heard the mutters rise up across the room.

Murderers, the women chanted beneath their breaths. Murderers! One old woman came forward and threw a glass of dark purple wine in Domitia's face. Droplets scattered across Julia's stola. 'Make me disappear,' the crone hissed. 'I don't care. I've lived my life. I don't know how you live with yourselves.'

Younger daughters or nieces ran forward to drag the old woman away, apologizing to the imperial women. They turned their faces away as they did so, as if hoping they would not be remembered in association with the crone.

Licinia, the Chief Vestal, stepped forward then to pour the milk and honey into cups that were passed from woman to woman. 'We are all Romans here,' Licinia said, as if the incident with the old woman had never happened. Her eyes met Julia's, and if there was

a message there, it was too deep to read.

When the cup reached her, Julia drank deeply. I have betrayed no one.

The Emperor Titus went down to the Sabine territory, but was discomfited when a lamb escaped during sacrifice, and again when thunder resounded in a stormless sky. At the first stopping place he was seized with a fever, and as he was being carried from there in a litter, it is said that he pushed back the curtains, looked up to the heavens, and lamented that his life was being taken from him unfairly; he said that he had only made a single mistake in his life and reign. What this was he did not himself disclose at the time, nor could anyone easily divine. The most common belief was not the rumoured affair with his brother's wife, nor the sending away of his lost love Berenice of Judea, but the accommodations made to the new visitors who continued to behave as if Rome was their farmyard, and all Romans their lambs to roast at temple or table.

– Suetonius, 'Life of Titus.'

5) and there is nothing safe in this world

Emah's body was smooth. He had not a hair on his back or chest or groin, and his skin was so cold that at times it felt as if Julia lay beside a living statue. Even when he was inside her, the heat came from her flesh, not from his.

When he slept, every crease and pore of his skin faded to nothing. If she ran her hands over his hip or the small of his back, it brought silk to mind, or water, not marble at all. In sleep, he did not even pretend to be human.

They had been married for two years. If the Vestal Virgins still plotted to oust the invaders, they never spoke of it to Julia. Perhaps they had never planned a rebellion at all, but said as much only to make her think that one day, she would be free.

'Mistress Julia,' came a hushed voice from the doorway.

Julia sat up, the sheets falling from her bare body. 'Nemone, what is it? Has my father returned?'

It worried her when Emperor Titus was away from the Palace. It was no secret that he was happier on military campaign than dealing with household and city matters, but his absence meant more power to her uncle Domitian, who enjoyed flexing his muscles

in the direction of palace politics, the Senate, and the private lives of his family.

'The Emperor needs you,' the slave girl said, looking upset. Julia did not stop to think why. She threw on a tunic and formal stola, and gave her hair a brief tidy in the polished bronze mirror. No time to bother herself about wigs and high fringes, as she might for a daytime appointment.

'Take me to him,' she commanded, and trailed Nemone across the Palace to her father's study.

Julia found Domitian sitting morosely at the large stone desk where her father so often spent his time plotting battles and the expansion of Empire. 'What -' she began. 'Am I in the wrong room?'

'That's amusing,' drawled her uncle. 'I've been asking myself that question all night.' He tossed a messenger scroll to her, and she caught it. The vellum was heavy and she could feel the wax residue scrape against her fingertips.

The words blurred beneath her eyes as she tried to read.

'I can save you the trouble,' said her uncle. 'Long live the Emperor, and all that. My brother succumbed to a fever. I know you're as devastated as I am. But we have the future of Rome to think about.'

Julia set down the scroll on the desk and stepped away from it. 'What future?' she said finally. She was so tired of never speaking plainly, and the hurt of her father's death was more than she had ever expected. Rage shot through her; an unusual feeling. 'We might as well lie down now and hand the city to the Nova. That's what everyone expects. You will be the last Emperor and after that – do they even age? I've never heard of one dying, and they all look so young. One of them can be your heir, and Rome will become – something new. Something that has nothing to do with us!'

Her uncle had a haunted air about him. Julia could not pretend that it was genuine grief - Domitian and Titus had never shared a brotherly fondness. Domitian looked like a man trapped in a well, with no sign of rescue.

'There's still time,' he said finally. 'For you to bear a son, or for me to adopt one.'

'You had better get on with adoption, then,' Julia flared. She had never known herself to be so fierce. 'There will be no son of my marriage, I know that. The priestesses told me so.'

Domitian nodded slowly. 'Another man could put a child in your belly,' he said after a moment, and for the first time made eye

contact with her. Julia shivered, unable to look away. Did he intend to perform that duty himself?

'If we do not respect the laws of marriage,' she said after a long and awkward moment. 'How can we expect the people of Rome to do the same? It would be a sour victory indeed.'

'I certainly do not wish to offend the gods,' Domitian said. Perhaps she amused him with her piety. 'But they have done me little good since our family came to power. If Juno wishes the marriage laws to be kept, why did she not shatter my wife into pieces rather than let our barren union continue?'

Julia felt as if she was standing on the very edge of a cliff, and that Domitian was deciding whether to give her an almighty shove.

'Perhaps,' she said, and then stopped.

Domitian's eyes flickered in the candlelight. 'Perhaps -?' he mocked, inviting her to continue.

Julia let the words tumble out of her before she could stop herself. 'If you are the last of the Flavian dynasty, then what is your legacy? Will you be remembered as the Emperor who did as his brother and father, lying down in the face of an invading army that rules us through fear? Or will you choose another path? Will you be the Emperor who fought back?'

Domitian stood very slowly and walked around his desk.

Julia wanted him to never reach her, never touch her. 'The women of Rome are on the very edge of rebellion, ready to rise up at a single word,' she said, forcing herself not to back away further, not to show her fear of him. 'The Vestals would help you, I'm sure they would, they promised me they were plotting against the invaders, and with the Vestals on our side, Rome must be safe -'

Domitian kissed her roughly, his hands seizing her face like she was a soup tureen to be cupped and drunk from. His mouth was hard on hers, his face scratchy from being too long away from the razor. He tasted of wine, far too much wine.

Lost, Julia thought desperately, frozen in fear. She had no way of fighting him that was not treason.

Domitian released her with a shove, sending her sprawling. The mosaic floor came up to meet her with a thud that was preferable to the kiss. 'Run away to your husband, Julia,' said her uncle. 'Play dress ups with that marble doll you married. If our dynasty has no future, what use are you to me?'

Shaking, Julia got to her feet and left the study, all the while

expecting him to come after her. The slave girl Nemone waited outside in the corridor to escort Julia to her room. When she saw the tear-stained face of her mistress, she silently offered a supportive arm.

In government administration, Domitian for some time showed himself inconsistent, with about an equal number of virtues and vices, and it is believed that it was fear and need which finally turned the virtues all into vices. He administered justice scrupulously and conscientiously, holding frequent tribunals in the Forum. He was the first of the Flavian Emperors to show no fear of the new visitors, declaring that they were subject to the laws of Rome as much as any other citizen; thus, many of the citizens prosecuted during his reign for adultery, extortion or fraud were indeed new visitors as well as original citizens. Neither were the wealthiest or most pious free from his scrupulous attentions, culminating in the trial of the Vestal Virgins, most sacred priestesses of Rome, in accordance with a most ancient rule of law.

- Suetonius, 'Life of Domitian.'

6) look for something left in this world

On the last day of the trial of the Vestal Virgins, Julia and Domitia waited in the confines of the Palace together, taking turns on the loom to keep their hands busy.

'He could not,' Julia said at one point, to a room of slaves and her sister-in-law, all studiously silent. 'He would not. The sacrilege…'

'He has declared that the sacrilege is theirs,' Domitia said quietly. 'Adultery, incest, all terrible crimes for any woman in Rome. But for the Vestals…'

When Domitian first embraced the accusations against the Vestals, Julia had thought it was part of a larger plan to pardon them at the last moment and use that goodwill to assure the women and their goddesses would support him when he – or they – moved against the Nova.

Now, however, she feared that she had miscalculated. Domitian was on no one's side except his own.

'His decisions have become more erratic of late,' said Domitia, her cool white eyes revealing nothing. 'You know this to be true, Julia. He is not the Emperor that his brother and father were.'

'You only say that because he no longer agrees with everything

you say,' Julia muttered.

'Indeed,' said Domitia, to her great surprise. 'I believe that Domitian has forgotten how much he owes to his wife and her people. We have been here so long that he takes our support for granted. Still, it will not matter soon.'

There was a threat in those words, Julia was certain. Why should Domitia let her intentions slip so easily now? Perhaps Julia had been here so long, the docile daughter of the house, they thought her harmless.

I do not know how to be anything but a collaborator.

A door slave came, with a message for Julia. 'Representatives from the temples of Rome have come to pay their respects to the niece of Domitian Augustus.'

Julia opened her mouth to say that she wouldn't - couldn't see them, but there was Domitia at the loom, her hands busy, her face blank once again. There was no way Julia could insist on privacy.

Let them come, if they must, and speak any words they had to say in front of witnesses.

Julia recognised Eustacia, the African priestess of the Bona Dea, and a few others in this odd delegation. An elderly priestess of Concordia, and a lithe young representative of Venus Verticordia. There was a strangely-dressed matron in orange face-paint who must surely come from the temple of Cybele - there was no other reason for the two eunuch priests at her side who jangled with bells and tiny cymbals with every movement.

Julia had never seen so many priestesses in one place before, except for the women's festivals. Anyone would expect to see at least a few Vestal Virgins in such a group, but of the Vestals had other commitments today, defending half their sisters in a court that rarely allowed women to speak.

The priestesses noted the presence of Domitia, but did not ask for her to be excluded.

'Julia Flavia, Daughter of the Deified Titus,' said Eustacia with great formality. 'We come to ask you to intercede with the Emperor Domitian in the matter of the Vestal priestesses.'

'And their innocence,' put in the priestess of Concordia, rather sharply.

'The matter has gone to law,' said Julia. 'I have no authority over such proceedings - the Vestals themselves have greater right to speak in a law court than any woman in Rome, including me. I

cannot influence my uncle.'

'Then,' said Eustacia in a stiff voice as if the very words pained her. 'I would ask to speak with Domitia Augusta, the wife of the Emperor Domitian.'

Domitia's hands stilled on the loom. 'I hear you, priestess.'

Eustacia, tall and graceful in her long white robes, stepped forward and inclined her head in a bow of respect. 'Domitia Augusta, your people have been among us for many years now. The Nova conquered Rome without violence. There have been disappearances, we know, of those who spoke out or struck against your kind, and yet not a single murder has been proved. The Nova have otherwise observed our customs closely, and respected our religious precepts. You have become Rome.'

Domitia lifted her chin, staring at the other woman. 'All of these things are true,' she said. 'We did not come here to steal Rome. When our work is done, we do not intend to leave our footprints behind.'

Julia stared at her. Not once – not ever had she heard any Nova mention the possibility that they might leave Rome someday. Emah had never let such a possibility slip.

'We welcomed you, Domitia Augusta,' said the priestess. 'Vesta, Concordia and the Bona Dea herself included you in her ceremonies. You have sipped the milk and honey. You have seen the sacred snakes, and the myrtle boughs. You are a matron of Rome, and you must guard the secrets as every woman of good standing in this city must guard them.'

Domitia stood. She wore the same high curling wigs that her predecessor had preferred, and yet for all her slavery to fashion, she had as much dignity as these priestesses. 'All of these things are true. I would not cross the Bona Dea, nor betray the secrets of Vesta. I was… honoured to be included in the rites of Roman matrons.'

'Then you will help us,' said Eustacia. 'The Nova will help us save the Vestals.'

A flicker crossed Domitia's face. 'What is it that you think I can do if my husband is set on punishing these priests for unchastity?'

'Vesta is the goddess of the hearth,' said Eustacia. 'Her flame still burns in the temple. That means that her priests are innocent, no matter what a court of men decides. If the flame of Vesta is extinguished, the city of Rome will fall. I tell you now, Domitia

Augusta, if these priests are executed at this Emperor's hand, the flame of Vesta shall never burn again. Is your loyalty to your husband, or to Rome?'

Julia watched the two women in fascination. She had thought when the Chief Vestal talked of using ‘women's ways' against the Nova, it had been about fermenting rebellion, not integration.

'You speak treason,' said Domitia, though she did not sound displeased.

'There are times,' said the priestess of the Bona Dea, 'When an Emperor's very actions speak against the gods. Every citizen must decide for themselves what is best for Rome.'

Domitia gave nothing away with her expression. Then, very slowly, she nodded.

Some hours later, when the Emperor Domitian returned to the palace with Emah at his side, he was drunk on wine and self-importance. His eyes sparkled madly, as if he had come from a bloody show at the Amphitheatre.

Domitia came to her feet first. Julia's felt like lead, weighing heavy on the floor. 'What news?' asked the wife of Domitian.

'The priesthood of Vesta shall return to its traditional standards of purity,' said the Emperor cheerfully. 'Alas, in this instance, the maximum penalty of the ancients shall apply - to all six of the sisters, those who transgressed and those who spoke in their defence. Bury the bitches deep and throw away the key.'

Now Julia was on her feet, with no real idea how she had got there. 'You are going to bury them all alive?' she gasped.

'Why Julia,' said Domitian, enjoying the moment. 'Don't you think it's for the best? You yourself told me that the Vestals were plotting against Rome.'

'The act is done,' said Emah. 'The Vestals have been locked in a chamber deep beneath their temple, where no man may reach them. Earth is being piled over the door, to keep them secure.'

It would take them days to die. Traditionally they would be left with food and water to ensure that their death would be from a lack of air, and nothing else. Julia remembered her childhood nightmares after realizing women had died this way, hundreds of years ago.

'It does not end here,' Domitian continued. 'As Pontifex Maximus, it is my duty to ensure every priest in Rome behaves to the

standards required of his or her office. Only then can I be sure that the gods will be with me. If I have to execute every religious leader in the city, I think it's a small price to pay.'

Julia closed her eyes. She had always wondered what terrible thing her family might have done, to be so cursed by the gods. Now she knew. Domitian was earning the hatred of the gods right now, and every generation before and after him would suffer for his crimes.

How is it that you gossip so loudly about the handful of murders attempted by an Emperor we used to know, and speak not one word about the decades of death perpetrated by our kind invaders, the statuesque seducers about whom you write such forlorn love poetry, abandoned Roman ladies? Unlike your husbands, the men of marble are always hard and at the ready...

– Juvenal, 'The Satires'.

7) it's a nice day to start again

Julia wanted to scream, and stamp, and hurl things out of the window. This was her fault. Her careless, innocent words had been turned into weapons against the city. She felt Emah's hand on her arm and allowed him to guide her away before she let her anger unfurl against Domitian.

She did not realize they were in an unfamiliar part of the Palace at first, but Emah was leading her down further steps, and around, and deeper still into the layers beneath ground.

Julia caught her breath. There were catacombs down here, as there were beneath the Temple of the Vestals. Did her husband intend her to share the fate of those women? Her arm shook beneath his hand.

Emah led her through a silver door into a high-ceilinged room that felt like a temple. Everything gleamed as white as his skin, brighter than any toga or fountain could be bleached.

'Where are we?' Julia asked in a gasp.

'This is how we came to Rome,' said Emah. 'This is our ship.'

'It's beneath the Palace?'

'Not exactly. It rests in a dimension that is connected loosely to the Palace.'

Julia shook her head, unable quite to grasp the concept. 'Why are

you showing me this?'

'I wanted you to know the truth.'

'Why now?' Julia brushed her hand lightly against the wall, and found it warm. Not like marble at all, or even her husband's skin.

Emah did not answer. Instead, he took her hand and led her deep into the temple that he called a ship. Julia found herself in a chamber where the ceiling was made of bright blue water, bubbling and churning around her head, with fierce lights dancing in and out of the liquid. 'These are our engines,' he told her. 'They drive the ship - propel it forward, as oars do the ships of Rome.'

'They are beautiful,' Julia said softly.

'They were empty,' Emah said. 'For a very long time. I did not tell you the truth before, when we spoke of Aeneas and Lavinia. That beginning of Rome, the first story from Virgil's Aeneid - that was where we intended to land. But it all went wrong.'

'You invaded our city by accident?' It was almost funny, though Julia could tell by the look on Emah's face that he did not find it so.

'Once we knew that it was inevitable we land in this century, we managed to guide ourselves to the beginning of your grandfather's reign before our engines were completely drained. Vespasian is remembered as a - calm and stable emperor, after a time of chaos. We thought we could be well on our way again before Domitian came to power.'

'But you sought to control him anyway, through Domitia,' Julia observed.

'Indeed. We knew if we were still here by the time Domitian's reign began, we would need every weapon we had against him.'

A wedding is not a weapon, Julia began to say, but of course it was. 'My uncle is not remembered kindly, then, in this history of yours,' she said, not especially surprised. 'Is his reputation better or worse than that of Caligula?'

'Nero would be a more apt comparison,' said Emah uncomfortably.

And here they were, talking treason in a place that should not exist, beneath engines that bubbled and gurgled like a fountain in a grotto. 'Ah,' said Julia. 'As bad as that.'

'Nine more years,' said Emah. 'Nine years from the execution of the Vestals to the death of Domitian. We thought perhaps that our presence might have a restraining effect on him, especially with the influence of Domitia. But comparisons between the early years on record and those we have witnessed suggest that we have had the

opposite effect. He is more angry, more unstable than even history reports.'

'How many Vestals died last time around?' Julia asked. It was all quite ridiculous, speaking of such things – as if she were in a play, or a dream.

'Three.'

'So what are you going to do about it?' Fury flared within her. Now she had let herself feel angry, it was hard to feel anything else. 'You took our city, forced us into childless marriages to control us, and now you are telling me that you made our history worse than it was before? How will you fix what you have done?'

'The engines are full,' said Emah in that gentle, kind voice of his. It made her want to slap him. 'We can leave now, and we shall, before we do further damage to the timeline.'

'No,' she gasped. The thought of him leaving was a slap in the face. 'Not good enough.'

'Not good enough indeed!' rang out another voice, and Julia went cold all over as she saw Domitian standing in the doorway. He looked drunk, his toga askew, and his eyes far too bright. Domitia Longina was behind him, her stola rumpled and her wig all but tumbling from her head in her haste to catch up. 'Has he told you, this beautiful husband of yours, how they filled those engines?' Domitian continued. 'It's a funny story. It will make you laugh.'

'Don't,' said Emah.

'Tell me,' whispered Julia. She did not know whose side she was on, but she was tired of secrets.

'It was part of the accord,' Domitian slurred. 'They actually wrote it down in a contract that my father Vespasian signed. All those disappearances, Julia. All those people who spoke up about the 'new barbarians.' Every man who whispered in the street, or challenged the Nova's right to stroll in as if they owned the Empire. Every citizen that disappeared. They were brought here. That is why no body was ever found, no proof against them.'

Julia looked up at the bubbling blue liquid of the engines. 'You used their bodies? Boiled them up to make this concoction?'

'Nothing so crude!' Emah said desperately. 'It was information we needed from their bodies. Information is - power. No, wrong translation.' He struggled with what to say next.

'Fuel,' Domitian snapped. 'I believe the phrase you are looking for is - information is fuel. They studied those bodies down to tiny

particles and everything they learned about them went in there.' Yes, he was drunk. Julia could smell the wine from here. 'Only you couldn't analyse the corpses fast enough, could you? Poor little stranded tourists, you wanted to be gone before the Big Bad Domitian came to power.' Slowly, he drew a knife out of the folds of his toga. 'Come away from the barbarian, Julia. Stand with me. We'll leave together.'

Julia stared at the knife and wondered if it would actually do any damage, against Nova skin. She had never tried to hurt her husband, or any of the others. Perhaps if she had, she would be in those engines now along with Annia and everyone else who had ever dared to speak up.

'He kills you,' Emah blurted out. He reached out, not quite catching Julia's arm. 'Within four years, Julia. That's your fate in the old history. Either by his hand or - because of the abortion he forces upon you. Because he does not want you to bear his child.'

Bile rose in Julia's throat. She wanted to be sick.

'He's lying,' said Domitian. 'They are the invaders, Julia. Whose side are you on?'

'Another timeline, perhaps,' said Domitia, taking her turn to speak. 'But it happened, sister. He made you his mistress, when the other Domitia Longina ran away from him. There was a pregnancy, and either he fed you vile herbs to end it, or he strangled you with his bare hands.' Domitia sighed at Emah. 'You were right. We should have told her long ago.'

Julia whirled on him too. 'That's the fate you plan to abandon me to, husband? Now that these precious engines of yours are full of – of information about Roman corpses?'

'He's not going anywhere,' snarled Domitian, and lunged forward with the knife. Domitia, marble white and impassive as ever, held a small grey stick to his neck. There was a hissing sound, and the Emperor dropped like a stone.

Julia stared at the woman who had called her sister.

Domitia tilted her head slightly. 'The other Domitia Longina killed him, in that other timeline,' she said. 'Poison. The new dynasty of Emperors celebrated her as a heroine, for the service she had done to Rome.'

Julia let out a ragged sob. Her uncle, her Emperor, (her murderer, they claimed) lay at their feet and all they could talk about was a history that never happened. 'Will you kill me too? If I'm supposed

to die at Domitian's hands, you've messed it up. You should have waited to kill him until I was dead and buried.'

'My dear,' said Domitia in a kind voice. 'Who said we have any responsibility to preserve history?'

'You're our last chance,' said Emah. 'Our last chance to leave Rome tidier than we found it. The Empire needs you, Julia.'

She wanted to laugh wildly. 'Am I to be Emperor now? Is that how you think Rome works, that you can simply hand such power to a woman?'

'If you have a son, you can rule in his name until he comes of age,' said Domitia. 'We have the technology to make such a child for you, in our laboratories.'

'Even if there was a child,' said Julia, 'Even if you could do that impossible thing, Emah is my husband, so no child of mine would be a Roman citizen. The Senate would never…'

But then she stopped, because they were smiling, both of them, her husband and her sister-in-law, aliens in complete accord with one another.

'With the Emperor gravely unwell, the Nova have the balance of power in the Senate,' said Domitia Longina.

'Are we to lie, then, and hide the fact that he is dead?' whispered Julia. Emperor. They were trying to make a woman Emperor. What on earth would the gods say? Would Vesta's flame flicker at the ridiculous notion, or burn twice as strong?

'He is stunned,' Emah admitted. 'Not dead. He will sleep until we decide what to do with him. But I should add, if he is known to be on the brink of death, whomever is declared temporary ruler will have the power to dig up the Vestal Virgins before they run out of air.'

Julia closed her eyes as this final unfair fact sank into her mind. 'If you do this for me, will you go? The Nova, all of you. Will you leave and never come back?'

'We will be bound by the Emperor's wishes,' said Emah, and bowed his head.

Julia looked at the fallen body of her uncle, knowing she could still save him. Or she could save the women he had condemned. 'Before you leave, put him in your damned engines with the others.'

Upon the death of her uncle Domitian, whose grave illness was surely caused by the fury of the gods after his false accusations against the

Vestal Virgins, Julia Flavia Augusta Caesar was declared Emperor with full support of the senate and the priests of the city, until the boy Novus Flavius Caesar came of age.

On the first day of her reign, the new visitors were banished from the Empire forever. Thus the Flavian dynasty are remembered both for making peaceful accord with the invaders, and also for freeing the city of their quiet tyranny.

– Suetonius, 'Life of Julia'

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1 Translator's note: the Latin term *nova barbaros* is presented here as 'new visitors' rather than the traditional translation 'invading barbarians' since Suetonius displays none of the violent antagonism towards the 'Nova' that we see in the work of his contemporaries.

Playing For Time VIII

Once, before his lover had shown him how to safely handle them, Tefen had been knocked into next week by a shock from a power cable. This is the exact reverse of that feeling – being snapped violently awake into blinding light.

He throws one arm over his face and flails out with the opposite hand. Cold fingers catch him and stop him from falling. The medical bay. Back here again, he thinks. Why? His head is completely empty. Has he been in the red tank again? What's missing, why is he alone, where is the chronomasticon?

Warm breath in his ear. 'Oh, sweetheart, I knew you could do it!'

'Triphis?'

'I knew you'd find it for me.' She strokes his cheek. 'Oh, and you went through so much on my behalf.'

'What?' His hands clutch at empty air, like a kitten's paws kneading nothing.

'The chronomasticon proper is an index of unstable points in time - a map showing hazards to navigation. Points to avoid.'

'That's true,' coughs Tefen.

'But that's not all the sphere is, is it?'

Someone makes him drink a mouthful of water. 'The map is only a small part of it.'

'It's the long-lost manual for the ship.' Her eyes gleam. 'I'm very grateful.'

'What,' says Tefen again.

She plants a kiss on his lips. 'Chrys never really wanted to leave. Poor Quiver tried so hard. But he just didn't have what it takes, baby.'

'Training as a translator,' says Tefen, blankly. 'It never occurred to him to try and talk to the red weed.'

'Shows why you shouldn't jump to conclusions. He thought the weed was a mindless guard for something else in the tank,'

'So did you!' protests Quiver.

Tefen's eyes have started adjusting to the light. There are medical technicians fussing over him, but there are more people in the bay – security drones, several of them, and on their knees, Chrys and Quiver.

And there's the sphere, set out on a bench, its interior glowing in

chrome yellow, manganese violet, cobalt blue –

'I'm going to fuse you with it,' says Triphis. 'Body, mind, and soul. You'll be the intermediary between me and it. You'll be a manual for the manual! And these boys are going to help.'

Tefen tears his eyes away from the globe of light and looks at them. Their shirts have been removed to show their tattoos, over the heart for Chrys, down the shoulder for Quiver. There are still pieces of Chrys' shirt left, so he put up a struggle, and look, the drones even hit him in the face. She's not joking.

'This day came a lot sooner than I thought it would,' says Chrys. 'I thought there'd be more time.' Quiver just looks at the floor. Maybe he's relieved. At least she's not going to put us in the red tank. Well, thinks Tefen dully, not until after she's used your blood and bone to weld me into the ship's manual.

'It's only fair,' Triphis is saying. 'Each of you contributed your own little bit to finding it. Oh, my beautiful boys. Think what we can do with this – together!'

Chrys says, 'For God's sake, Tefen, say something. You don't want to be swallowed up inside that thing, do you?'

He does. He does, of course. That's the other reason Triphis had him unlock it on her behalf. There's nothing he wants more at this moment than to dissolve back into those toxic colours and vanish forever.

Oh well. You can't have everything. Where would you put it?

'Triphis,' says Tefen, 'that wasn't the only thing I found.'

Project Thunderbird
Kelly Hale

Wounded Knee, South Dakota. 28th December, 1890

There was no drumming in a Ghost Dance. Only the sound of feet dragged along the earth. Nothing made by white men could touch the dancers either. No metal coins or pins. No bells or glass beads. The dancers danced until a vision moved them, fell to the ground while others danced on, until those others also succumbed and fell. Later, they might make a song of their visions and share the song with the rest of the people. This is how the Ghost Dance was told to the Paiute prophet Wovoka by a spirit-person and how the prophet told it to the people.

But this spirit-person pushes a drum at Yellow Bird, saying, 'Why do you argue with a spirit-person? I tell you now the ghost shirts are not enough to stop the white man's bullets. This is how the Ghost Dance must be danced now if you want your beloved dead to hear you.'

The drum is beautiful - translucent skin stretched over smooth curving bones that gleam like polished metal. He can't tell what kind of bones, what kind of skin, but the army captain's buttons glinting in the sun were never so blinding bright and beautiful.

'Your ancestors are deaf from wagons and iron horses and screaming wires and songs white men make for their god. Only with this – ' the drum in his face – 'can your cries for their return be heard above the din. This drum makes a sound, old and deep, like the rumble you feel beneath your feet long before you see the buffalo running. It is the only sound the dead can hear.'

Yellow Bird isn't old enough to have seen buffalo herds so large that their running could be felt through the ground days before they were seen. Old people still talked about it with shaky voices and tears in their eyes – oh oh, buffalo herds like a great blanket thrown over the prairies! Buffalo herds so vast you could shoot your arrow into the air and anywhere it fell would hit buffalo! A wished-for world, he thinks, not the world as it truly is. He hasn't even tasted buffalo since he was a boy.

He raises his head. He will look the spirit-person in the eyes, if it has eyes. He will not trade a futile hope for his honest despair. He

wants certainty and if he can't have certainty then he will have nothing.

He'd heard it's hard to look a spirit straight on and not be blinded. Heard the Paiute prophet had nearly died from looking. But Yellow Bird, on his knees, raises his eyes from the shining drum to the thing offering it.

It is woman-shaped, dressed in doeskin so white it lights the darkness. The long fringes shift like snow flurries in the wind. Her hair is blood red spilled over the white of her bosom and she wears a headdress of bone and feathers. Feathers circle her eyes and down the bridge of her nose – brown, white, black, red. Sharp tufts of feathers jut from the crown of her head and her eyes are huge and golden. Is this hiha'n winu'cala who guards the road to the afterlife? Old Owl Woman? If anyone knows how to call back the dead it is she.

But she seems too young with her lips the colour of ripening chokecherries – a maiden emissary, perhaps. She smiles at him, holding out the drum in her beautiful arms, fringe trembling like new grass. The space around her is bright as day though around him the ravine is black, and above him the wind screams of blizzards approaching. And yet, though she wears all the marks of beauty he can see there is something not quite right–

The doubt in his mind pushes and he blinks and in that blink she is suddenly distant. Each breath he huffs out pushes her farther and farther back, pulling all light with her, folded into the depths of a robe made of darkness. Gone, the white dress, the shimmering red of her hair, her feathered horns, the drum –

The drum!

He cries out, a plea from deep in his heart, and reaches for her, for the drum. 'No! Come back. Help us spirit-person! Save us!'

'Save your selves,' she says, and sways her hips with drum slung across her belly, her womb. Women don't drum, don't handle drums, yet he must come and wrest it from her now. Someone is laughing, a high thin laugh, his own laughter, cracking like ice on a river.

Spirit-persons can change their minds about the rules of a game like anyone else, he supposes. He takes a step towards her, thinking, there can be more than one prophet and I could be that one more. He reaches for the drum and then the drum is in his hands. Two fingers gone now. Blood drips down, plop plop plop, his heart the

drum, his blood the beater, beating the blood onto the snow –

He travels a memory, his journey with Black Elk and Short Bull, meeting the prophet Wovoka and learning the Ghost Dance way, and how they had dreamed the ghost shirts after speaking with the prophet, dreamed the painted symbols on them, and the power in them. The ghost shirts, so imbued with the power of the symbols, could stop bullets. But in dreams the shirts were made of good buckskin, and no one has good buckskin to make new shirts these days. They've made their shirts out of canvas and calico.

If nothing that comes from the white men can be worn in the ghost dance then the shirts will never stop bullets. He'd realized his folly on the march back to Wounded Knee Creek. Slipped out of camp to come here, offer his flesh for a dream or else die here.

But now he sees. Those visions were not false. The spirit person has proved it, taken another flesh offering, shown him a different path to the same place.

He taps the drum lightly, once, twice. Feels more than hears it, a stirring beneath his feet, down deep beneath the blood and snow, something turning over and stretching under the sleeping grasses, between the burrows of mice and prairie dogs, coils of snakes and worms, dirt and clay and rock and fire.

The army men have told the people there can be no Ghost Dance. But the army men will think this is a different dance because of the drum. None of these white men soldiers can tell words from other words, steps from other steps. It will seem like a new dance to them and then – and then from under the robes of Hunkpapa and Brule and Minicanjou will come the guns and from under the earth will come –

He turns to ask the spirit-person if the ancestors will bring their own horses and weapons, but she has already enveloped herself in darkness and disappeared.

Umatilla Country, Hunting Moon, 1972

Lalla was checking the traps along the river when Grover finally found her. 'You got any tobacco on you?' she signed at him. She didn't feel like talking and the roar of the river was a noisy excuse not to. He wouldn't hear her anyway – like the way she didn't hear him groaning at her lack of foresight.

In her rush to get the task over with, she'd forgotten to bring an

offering of any kind, save herself, which was stupid because her hands and arms were covered in little cuts and half-healed scars from all the blood medicine offerings she'd had to give when putting them together in the first place. She knew Grover would let her have tobacco if he had it on him. He wouldn't want her to cut herself, not for this. It's not that she minded doing it for good-medicine reasons. But as a gesture of respect, any offering to ghosts was starting to feel more like extortion.

There was a joke making the rounds of powwows and council meets that the Cherokee down Oklahoma way made their offerings with oil from all the wells on their land. That they filled the tanks of their cars and pick-up trucks at the Chickasaw refineries in Ponca City and then 'offered' to drive the wana'gi to Boston and put 'em on a boat to England. They could fight all the white folks they wanted to over there. That's where most of the white people were now anyhow. Or a lot of them. Lem was there. Probably. She didn't think about Lem much anymore.

Grover stood next to her, tobacco pouch in hand, willing to part with it for her sake, but looking sad nonetheless, and a tiny bit resentful on account of it being the good stuff from Oneota with the mark of Buffalo Bird Woman right on the front. This was the kind of tobacco you offered to living spirits, plants and animals, water, sky and earth. It was also really good smoking tobacco. He gave Lalla the stink eye and turned away, squatting down on his haunches with his back to the wind, holding the flap of his jacket open, protecting his efforts to roll a cigarette one handed before handing over the pouch. She took it with a 'you're the best brother ever' smile and stuffed it into the big patch pocket of her blanket coat. Traps first. Offerings later.

Men of the tribe used to spear or dip-net fish here, and other places along the river like it, crouched or stretched out on their bellies on the platform below, wrestling the netted fish out of the rushing water. That's how she'd gotten the idea.

She placed both hands on the crank of the winch and leaned in with her body. Wind resistance and water spray made the snares swing awkwardly, seeming heavier than they were. Ghosts shouldn't weigh so much.

Deciding his cigarette could wait (and likely feeling guilty) Grover lent his strength to the task and in a few seconds they had the traps over the ledge and were dragging them to a dry patch some

distance away from the embankment. Lalla took a deep breath and undid the catches, and together she and Grover spun them out and rolled them open onto prickly grass.

Lalla had never seen a ghost look like a person she'd known. Others claimed to have seen the ghosts of children or parents or lost lovers, and she herself used to hope to see her mother. But now she wondered if ghosts simply snatched up the discarded spectral skins of the dead and put them on like costumes – 'Look at me, ha ha, I'm Denny Dogskin's crazy aunt Tootoosis!'

Anyway, what went into the traps didn't look anything like human people when the traps were emptied, didn't even look like the ghosts of people. Sometimes there would be long smears in the snares, hardened nacreous streaks that might resemble a face, but no more than the shadows on the moon resembled a face. Most of the time the contents looked like desiccated sheep's bladders with odd bits sticking out here and there, things like horns or teeth. Today, it was sort of limb bones (but not human limbs), and also a rawhide looking strip, twisted and shrivelled like the dried up umbilicus of Sasquatch. It was as if the ghosts were feasting in the outer worlds and returning here to vomit.

The first time she'd seen what was in the traps she'd gotten sick herself. But that was a long time ago.

She pulled the tobacco pouch out of her pocket, took a little pinch in her left hand. 'Thank you for helping us drive the white men from our land, beloved ancestors,' she shouted at the sky, thinking, we'll take it from here, no need to keep hanging around scaring the fish and spooking the sheep. She waved her arm in an arc and opened her palm. The tobacco leaves scattered in the wind and out over the water. And after a moment the bits and pieces and smears and shapes dissolved and disappeared like water into sand – deep into the earth or back to the spirit world, she couldn't know. She wasn't a medicine woman. She just built the traps. They were pretty good traps though. She'd even build a ghost detector out of a geophone from an abandoned earthquake monitor, some magnets and copper coils, and other scavenged odds and ends.

When she was little she noticed the way the ghosts were drawn to big, noisy, rhythmic sounds – the pounding rush of water through ravines in spring, thunder on the prairies, stampedes, or even the booming of the oil rigs, jackhammers breaking up concrete in the cities – the sort of sounds that you felt in your bones and your

bowels.

She unfastened the safety pin she had stuck through a buttonhole and stabbed her thumb to set the trap again, hooked it onto the rope and dropped it from the overhang. The winch made a high pitched click-click-click-whine as the rope spooled out, then thunk as the trap bumped against the weir. The weir started to rumble and Lalla hurried away before the ghost catcher medicine really kicked in. It gave her headaches and diarrhoea if she lingered too long.

She brushed her hands together briskly as if to say, there, that's done and handed Grover his tobacco pouch. His lips were pinched tight together and he was scowling. Not at her, but at something.

'What?' she asked.

'Auntie sent me to fetch you back.'

'You couldn't have told me that before we hauled up the trap?'

He shrugged. She looked up at him, irritated, one eye squinting against the glare of the late afternoon sun - her little brother who was so much taller than her now, with his braids slung over his shoulders and the big brimmed hat pushed tight onto his head so the wind whipping off the river wouldn't send it flying. Of course, it was just as likely to be a ghost tearing it off as the wind.

She blew out a noisy sigh. 'If this is about me fixing the fridge again I already told Granddad it's not the fridge, it's the generator.'

'You were supposed to fix that too.'

'I just got back this morning!' She'd spent the later part of the summer at Rosebud with her dad's people, helping build wind turbines for their ghost catchers. And before that, she'd been in Cheyenne country doing the same thing.

Grover scuffed the toe of a boot into a clump of squirrel-tail grass. 'Yeah. Well. John Sohappy stopped by.'

'Great. What he'd offer Granddad this time?'

'Don't think it had to do with his wanting to marry you. They were being cagey so I couldn't make out a lot but pretty sure it's got to do with the Many Nations Council come new moon. Reckon you been called.'

When Lalla and Grover got back to the house, Aunt Shoni was arguing with Granddad. 'How's she gonna get there without you letting her take the Chevy? All the way to Navajo country in three days? What? On horseback?'

'Coulda done it in my day,' he muttered. She scoffed loudly, and he

said, 'John Sohappy'll drive her. He's council chief now and he has to get there himself.'

'Oh no. Nuh uh. She already told him she wasn't interested. Whatever you two got planned–'

Lalla rattled the screen door and they broke off talking, but as soon as the door banged shut behind her, Granddad reached for his old straw cowboy hat. 'Me and Grover got to check the reservoir down by Black Sage before dark.' He slid past Lalla and out the door. Grover had just wiped his feet on the mat when Granddad made his pronouncement. He groaned, threw his hands up and spun on his heel after the old man.

Aunt Shoni watched the truck disappear in the dust raised behind it, her mouth screwed up tight, laugh lines and wrinkles all but disappearing into the sinkhole of her great displeasure. She flicked her hands across her faded print apron, a gesture somewhere between a snap of dismissal and a clean brush-off, then placed them on her hips and huffed, 'Don't know what these men are thinking sometimes.'

'So it's true?' Lalla asked her. 'They've called me to Many Nations?'

'Word's got round about your snares. Everybody's gonna wanna know how to make their own.'

'You have to come with me, Auntie. It's your medicine. I just build the traps.'

Aunt Shoni took Lalla's face between her hands, her eyes glinting with pride. 'You're the only one building the traps, my girl.'

'That's not true. Other people are doing it.'

'Yes. Now. Because they saw how yours worked!'

Three years ago a lot of the people didn't think her traps were a good thing at all. They all agreed the ghosts were troublesome, but they were still ancestors. It wasn't right to trick them, to trap them. Who knew where they went after getting caught in the traps? What if it they didn't walk-on but, rather, tumbled into some white man's hell? Those attitudes had lessened what with the crop blights and the salmon runs turned belly up, wild game not bothering to mate, and half the lambs born withered or deformed.

Aunt Shoni had long suspected the ghosts would overstay their welcome. After all, wasn't that often the case with relations? She'd seen the signs in dreams, she'd said. She'd also seen early that Lalla was attracted to all things mechanical – drive shafts, cranks, pulleys, and pistons, paddle wheels, and Ferris wheels. So when

Lalla was eight, Auntie went behind Granddad's back and arranged for Father Mike at the mission school to teach her niece higher maths and science. Traded him something, Lalla never knew what. He'd thought she was a boy for the longest time. Now she had a certificate in mechanical engineering from a correspondence school in England. She'd designed and engineered the river traps using the energy of the water, and the snares on the turbines at Rosebud using the energy of the wind. But the medicine of them – that was Aunt Shoni. Just like the medicine of the wind traps at Rosebud was Woodrow Sixkiller's. The medicine of the traps had to use the spirit energy of the place and the people. Lalla had no affinity for magic.

Auntie snatched a dish towel off the table, saying, 'Anyway, I'm not about to send you off alone with John Sohappy in that Cadillac of his.' She opened the oven and thumped the golden mushroomed tops of bread baking in old coffee cans.

'He's moony eyed,' Lalla told her, 'not … hands-y.'

'You think that's what I'm worried about?' The oven door closed with a creak and she turned round again with her arms crossed over her chest. 'I know his people don't think you're good enough for their boy - though he's hardly a boy anymore. And I'm sure your grandfather is right. They'd be willing to let that slide if it meant they got use of the reservoir for their cattle. But John Sohappy is weak-minded. He may have got himself elected council chief but he's no warrior. The ghosts are going to try and stop you.'

Lalla let out a nervous little laugh to cover her sudden frisson of anxiety. 'Oh, Auntie. The ghosts don't know me from a broom wearing a hat.'

Auntie flicked at a speck of flour with the towel. 'Well. That's as may be. But last night I had a dream. A portentous dream.' She took a breath and raised her eyes to meet Lalla's. 'In my dream Wowshuxkluh was attacked by a horned owl.'

Lalla's heart leapt to her throat. Wowshuxkluh, the oriole, Auntie's medicine bird.

'In the dream I saw him perched in a scrub oak off in the distance. I called out, 'Wowshuxkluh, what's going on? If you have something to tell me you better come over here.' And just as he started to lift from the branch, that horned owl came screeching out of the sky and attacked him. It happened in the time before the sun comes up. Not dark and not quite light. In between.'

'Did the owl –?' Lalla started, but couldn't bring herself to finish

the question.

'The dream didn't show me if the owl killed Wowshuxkluh. But I think it might. It will. Time's running out. Couldn't be clearer. I think this is what the Council has been shown too. Dreams like this. That's why they've called for you. That's why I'm going with you. Old Owl Woman has raised an army, my girl, and she wants this world for her own.'

Many Tribes Council meets were held twice a year, usually around the Geese or Flower Moons and again during the Travelling Moon. Not always though. Indians didn't keep schedules the same way the whites did. They didn't go by clocks or carry watches. (Well, some did, but mostly for looks.) Nature kept to her own schedule and a person had best work with it or work around it. The migration of the herds and birds and butterflies, the wool on the sheep, the spawning of fish, buds, roots, falling leaves, when to plant, when the sap runs and the ice cracks – these were things that happen around the same time of year every year but never precisely. Same with the days. When the sun came up in the winter certain things were done, and when it set in the summer certain other things happened. Factor in how the hunting or fishing was going, who was having a baby, who was getting married, and who was plotting a coup, well then, timing was pretty flexible, and nothing was writ in stone. But this particular Many Tribes Council carried with it a particular sense of urgency. Everyone was feeling it.

John Sohappy had driven all day and well into the night before they pulled off along the side of a road and made camp. He hadn't let Lalla spell him at all. He was fussed about his car, stopping at every little trading post with a gas pump hoping to skirt Salt Lake City, avoid that whole mess. There were only a couple of thousand whites left in its heart – hard faith Mormons all of them, mostly living in and around their great temple. But they kept rifle-watch on the roads. And they made their own ammo.

Aunt Shoni smudged the camp site and used red powder and yellow powder medicine to encircle it - including the car. She sang a song Lalla had never heard before. She told Lalla to get some sleep, that she was going to sit up for a bit and commune with the stars. That's where Lalla left her too, sitting on a folded blanket with another one wrapped around her, smudge stick in one hand and a prayer fan in the other. She was clearly hedging her bets

against potential ghost attacks. She even had a crucifix. Lalla slept surprisingly well on the leather back seat of John Sohappy's fancy car.

She had no idea where he slept. They were up before the sun and back on the road as it rose. By afternoon they were cruising into Santa Fe with the convertible's top down.

'This is a big one,' Aunt Shoni noted from the front seat as they sat idling with hundreds of others in a slow moving line of vehicles.

The Navajo were hosting this season. A different tribe or nation hosted every season, but usually only the biggest ones could afford it as everybody tried to outdo everybody else with the grandness of the giveaways and games and races and feasts and dances and fancy dress. The Navajo were a nation with their own elected president. They were still the largest tribe in North America. Lalla figured it was maybe the biggest Many Nations meet-up that had ever been. On the highway in they'd seen Seminole all the way from Big Cypress, and Micmac from Aroostook in Maine, and about every Confederation in California. It was causing quite the bottleneck of traffic. Lots of people had pulled over. A haze of exhaust fumes hovered in the air. Motorbikes were slipping through, and people on horseback, but not John Sohappy's dusty black Cadillac.

Lalla was glad she'd washed and changed at the Ankatosh truck stop in Durango. The sundress she'd made out of an old checked tablecloth last summer was pretty and comfortable. As soon as the sun went down she'd have to dig out her blanket coat, but for now the arid heat combined with the long drive had left her feeling pleasantly languid and patient in a way that John Sohappy currently was not. Her thighs were sticking together and she didn't even care.

The reason for the slow progress became clear when they finally got their first real look at the city. The bivouacs of thousands crowded the adobe pueblo houses, and sprawled across Spanish colonial plazas. Ahead, men with weapons were stopping cars and talking to the drivers before flagging them on.

'Dog-men?' John Sohappy said softly. 'What the hell?'

There were usually peacekeepers and bouncer-types at meet-ups, volunteers drawn by lottery from all the tribes. But this was not a task Dog-soldiers would deign to do even if they were asked politely by their own tribal leaders. They were the Cheyenne's most elite warriors. They wouldn't pin themselves to this sort of thing. Lalla

assumed John Sohappy was mistaken. But she saw as they got closer that he might not be. She recognized one of them, a tall guy she'd met briefly when she was setting up traps in Lame Deer. He was a distinctive person, with three thin white stripes tattooed from hairline to chin on both sides of his face, even over his eyelids. Right now he had his hair pulled back in a club at the nape of his neck Navajo fashion, and was sporting the rawhide visor Dog-soldiers favoured. His common name was Bob or…?

'Lalla? Lalla Winishut!'

… Bill.

He came over to the car, smiling huge at her. He had the whitest teeth, made whiter by the tattoos. His pearl-buttoned shirt was embroidered and beaded with a thunderbird on the yoke. Looking around she saw that several of the men watching the road and directing traffic had the thunderbird symbols on their shirts or jackets. Some stood slouched and hipshot, others lounged with deceptive idleness on the roofs of cars, but all held rifles gripped loosely in arms or across laps. A narrowly focused society of Dog-men then, probably temporary and for one purpose only. What that purpose was she didn't know yet. There were likely more watchers posted, hidden in the outcroppings of red rock and juniper.

'Bill,' she said, out loud this time, in a voice husky from lack of use. She smiled because it seemed the thing to do. 'How you been?'

'Troubled. And yourself?'

'Busy.'

'I hear that.'

'We've brought a medicine woman with us, my aunt Shoni Winishut.' Aunt Shoni nodded regally, but kept her eyes straight ahead. Women of her generation were still reluctant to meet the eyes of men not related to them. Bill seemed oddly relieved by that. Men, Lalla had noticed, were just as reluctant to have a medicine woman look them in the eye.

But John Sohappy, travel sore and patience thin, had had enough by then. 'I'm the duly elected chief council leader for the Umatilla. Is there someplace the leaders are supposed to go?'

Bill went very still, his face stony and his eyes unblinking as he gazed at the slightly chubby, prematurely balding man behind the wheel of a Cadillac convertible. A few seconds passed in which John Sohappy felt the need to swallow convulsively several times. Bill finally took a breath, smiled again (though somewhat less

effusively), and pointed at a sliver of dirt road between a Pontiac and a DeSoto with Dog-soldiers standing next to them. 'Take that about quarter mile and then northeast along the river until you hit a road block. That'll be the Mission San Miguel escort. Miss Winishut is expected. Her aunt is likely welcome too. Not sure where you go.'

The Sangre de Cristo Mountains were darkening at the peaks as the afternoon slid away. Soon they'd glow red in the rays of the setting sun, earning the name the Spaniards gave them. In the meantime John Sohappy drove as directed. He was tense in the jaw and feeling unappreciated, but after sitting in a line of vehicles for two hours, he seemed to find cheer in ambling along the Santa Fe River road at a brisk pace with no impediments. The other side of the sluggish river was crowded with travel-trailers, canvas tents and tipis, lean-tos built out from the backs of station wagons with babies sleeping beneath the tarps. Kids were running everywhere like always, yet there was something different about the atmosphere. Despite the usual riot of colour, noise, the pervasive smell of fry bread, of fish and meat smoking, of silica dust, and hot pine tar and sage burning, there was an undercurrent of tension, like everyone was holding something back, or waiting for some sign. And then she realized. No one was drumming.

As they approached a haphazard assortment of cars parked at all angles in a field, one of the Dog soldiers held up a hand for the Cadillac to stop. He strolled over, cigarette hanging from his lip and rifle at the ready. 'Who're you?'

John thrust his hand out like a white man politician. 'John Sohappy, Umatilla head man.'

His jaw was set, ready to do battle – verbally at least – for the respect he was due.

'Huh.' The Dog-man didn't take the offered hand but leaned on door, looking at the Umatilla head man's passengers. 'You did a good job bringing these women here.' John Sohappy drew back, blinking. That was a sincere compliment. Man to man.

Lalla realized at that moment that the tension and anxiety John Sohappy had shown on the journey may have had less to do with his car and more to do with the strain of getting her and her aunt to Many Nations safely.

'Do you entrust the safety of Ghost-trapper woman and Ghost-

medicine woman to us?' the Dog-man asked. John Sohappy nodded. And just like that they were quietly given over to the care of Cheyenne Dog-soldiers who escorted them into the chapel of the oldest church in the former United States of America - a church built with the labour of enslaved Indians right over the sacred pueblos of their own ancestors.

Though the setting was less than traditional much had been done to make the chapel of San Miguel suitable for the needs of the council. The pews had been removed, and low benches brought in and set two deep in a rough suggestion of a circle. In the centre a long fire pit of glowing coals cast the only illumination, save the fading light through the windows, high up and set deep in thick adobe walls through which thin tendrils of smoke from the fire pits drew up and out.

Here were gathered sixty or so chiefs, elders, leaders, and governors from across the lands. As there were several hundred tribes in the former United States, the present company was barely representational. The space wasn't big enough to hold every delegation. Lalla wasn't sure how they worked it all out so no one got offended – or even if they had worked it out. John Sohappy and representatives like him would be less than thrilled to be left out of the loop even if they'd been told in advance about the reasons for exclusion.

It was certainly an august membership, many outfitted in traditional headdresses, sashes and symbols requisite of their positions within their tribes. The eldest elder of this council was Lakota, a very old man indeed, and though she was pretty sure she knew who he was, she'd never actually met him – Growing Thunder, Hunkpapa chief and oldest living survivor of the battle at Wounded Knee.

He was seated at the front of the church where the altar once stood. The decorated altar screen had been left intact and filled the wall behind him, late afternoon rays of sun illuminating the portraits of saints, and of Jesus Nazareno in the centre of them all, looking out over this assemblage of heathens. He seemed pretty okay with it. To the left of Growing Thunder was the Navajo president, Aaron Yazzee. The right side of the bench was empty.

Their escort directed Lalla and her aunt to one of the benches behind the Nez Perce delegation. Lalla pulled her blanket coat

around her flimsy little sun dress. She felt inappropriate, self-conscious. She'd brought a traditional outfit, her mother's wedding dress – Auntie had insisted – but that was currently in the trunk of John Sohappy's car, (along with her designs, schematics, drawings, calculations, formulas and ghost tracker).

She and Aunt Shoni were the only women present. Women were not usually included in these things. As soon as they sat down Auntie grabbed her hand – nerves, Lalla thought or maybe to lend comfort and camaraderie – until the older woman's fingernails dug into the flesh of her wrist and shook her arm. A warning.

There was a man coming out of the sacristy. A white man.

A white man she knew.

It had been three years since Lalla had seen any white people, and longer since she'd seen Lemuel Roth. She'd thought that if she ever did see him again she might not recognize him, the way faces blurred in the memory. They'd been so young then, barely in their teens. But the idea that she wouldn't remember his face seemed ludicrous now. He was Lem. Here. Her Lem.

She could feel the pressure of her aunt's grip squeezing, squeezing – don't move, my girl, don't do anything foolish – because she wanted to leap up, of course, her heart beating so fast, like a hummingbird's, would beat right out of her chest if she couldn't move or shout or something. But there was a solid wall of shoulders in front of her, and Aunt Shoni's fingers banding her flesh, shaking her arm, trying to get her attention.

The men in front of them turned scowling, and she realized she was emitting a low, whining sort of growl. But through the space their disapproval created between their bodies, she got a good look at him.

He seemed taller. Men did that, grew, kept growing sometimes into their twenties. Taller, yes. His hair was shorter, darker, as if he didn't get out in the sun as much, the curls sticking out in tufts behind his ears. In profile, his chin looked weaker than she remembered, and his nose a bit longer, but it was definitely him. Him.

Why?

She only noticed the other men that had followed him out of the sacristy when they were taking places on Chief Growing Thunder's bench – two whites and one African with skin so dark it seemed more blue than brown. The ripple of shock at their appearance

turned quickly to shouts of alarm and outrage amongst the congregation and accusations of betrayal. Peacekeepers moved to flank the old man when he held up a hand.

'Friends, brothers,' he began in rough-hewn English. 'Let me tell you a story, okay? Anogoptan.' He asked them to just listen. Though his voice was not as strong as it must have been once, his quiet authority commanded attention and respect. In Lakota he said, 'This is how it was at the battle of Wounded Knee.'

Sign talkers moved to either end of the fire pit. The Nez Perce men in front of Lalla turned to watch the translations. So did Aunt Shoni, but Lalla didn't need to watch the signers translate. Her mother had been Umatilla, but her father was Minicanjou Lakota. As Growing Thunder's soft guttural narration washed over her she watched Lem, quietly translating for the men with him.

'I was only little, on my mother's lap, wrapped in the same robe with her, just my eyes looking out. The snow was thick and the wind was angry. When Yellow Bird began to beat the sacred drum the soldiers did not know it was a Ghost Dance. The people were dancing and looking at the soldiers, sly, because they were fooling them that this was some other dance. I could see their breaths puff out in white clouds. The drum made a sound I felt deep inside my bones. I was little and I did not like the feeling. The soldiers felt it too. Their eyes flicked back and forth, back and forth, afraid of the air itself. They said that the dancers should stop. They began to wave their rifles and shout for Yellow Bird to stop beating the drum. That's when the ghost warriors came up out of the snow arrows notched and spears aimed.

'They seemed made of snow and light, becoming more golden with each step like the sun in summer. Their war bonnets trailed the ground behind their horses, and their buckskin shirts were bright with quill work as they sped towards the camp.

'The soldiers raised alarm, raised their weapons and fired, but they shot at ghosts and the bullets went through the ghosts and the ghosts kept coming. Our old men were warriors again that day. They pulled the rifles they had hidden beneath their robes and killed all the soldiers. All of them.'

Some of the men in the chapel shouted 'Heya!' and whooped and hollered. The two white men with Lem looked tight-lipped nervous, but the black man laughed. Aunt Shoni clicked her tongue against her teeth. After a moment just long enough for the whooping men

to feel slightly uncomfortable about their outburst, Growing Thunder continued.

'I was little,' he said, 'and wept beneath my mother's robe because the sound of dying men was so loud. All through the killing Yellow Bird kept drumming. We won that day. Though we paid for it later. Still, this was the first battle we fought with our ancestors at our sides, and soon there were more ancestors. More battles won. Little by little we drove the white man from our lands. They fled to their cities and then to the east, and across the great water where they learned to call their own ancestors to fight battles for them, and everyone upon the Earth called the ghosts of their ancestors to fight battles for them, until this Earth, our mother was a battle ground for all the dead. Now the ghosts of everybody's ancestors devour the world. There will be nothing left of Her when they are done, nothing left for any kind of people, not human people, nor animal people, nor stone or water. I have seen it in a vision. And others have seen it too.'

President Yazzee rose and said, 'This is true. My wife and her sister dreamed something like this.' The Modok chief said his daughters and nieces had all dreamed that ghosts were trying to eat the babies still inside them. One of the Nez Perce men leapt up, and indicated various men he knew in the circle. 'We know why this is happening. Wovoka was not the only prophet. Smohalla spoke of this also –'

'And Tenkswatawa,' someone shouted from the Iroquois side.

'Kaw. He went crazy and thought everyone was a witch!'

'Don't matter,' said another. 'We were supposed to reject the ways of the white man, return to the old ways, and then everything would be good and right again. We made a promise and we didn't keep it. This is our punishment.'

Growing Thunder, who was watching the sign talkers, grunted suddenly. 'Ey, yeah, I hear what you're saying. But when the horses came, no one said, no horse for me, I'll keep the old ways, thanks all the same.' Ripples of discomfited laughter moved through the assemblage.

Aunt Shoni shot to her feet then, startling Lalla and the Nez Perce man who'd sat back down. She still had to stand on the bench in order to be seen as she told her dream of the owl attacking the oriole.

'Wowshuxkluh is my spirit bird,' she explained, 'my medicine, but he is also the sacred bird of Smohalla, the dreamer prophet who

came before Wovoka. My dream saw our sacred bird attacked but not death. I believe Smohalla sent this dream to show me that we have got to do something about the ghosts soon, before there's nothing left we can do!' She sat down and then quickly jumped up again. 'I'm Shoni Winishut, by the way, Umatilla medicine woman.'

Lalla pretended not to notice how badly her unshakeable aunt was shaking.

The black man rose, then, tall and lean and smiling. 'It's good to see there is a woman here who knows how to receive dreams, and also knows magic. We're going to have great need of you, madam.' He posed, one hand gripping the lapel of his jacket like a statue of Abe Lincoln. 'I am Dr. Gedulien Black. I study the weather. I was born in Haiti, but my people's ghosts are Yoruba from West Africa. Where I am from, we love our ancestors. We take meals with them. We leave gifts for them on their name days. They offer us guidance in times of trouble, and comfort, and advice. They can avenge wrongs and reward goodness. We know them well, as all of you know yours. But the ghosts that answered the call of the drums – those are not our ancestors. Those are creatures that dress themselves up in the skins our dead. I will tell you how I know this.

'One night, my beloved grand-mère came to see me in my sleep, as she had done many times since she passed on. But this night she didn't look happy, not peaceful at all, and it seemed a great effort for her to speak to me. It was so urgent she said because soon it would be too late. The people of the earth would not be on it much longer. 'When your grandchildren are old enough to have grandchildren, Gedu,' she said to me, 'ghosts will cover the world and there will be no room left for any children.' Those were her last words. She hasn't come to me since. Perhaps she can't. Perhaps it is already too late. But I know that if we don't work together – all of us, all the people of the earth – even the ones we don't like much – then we have no chance. We must help each other and we must all ask for help from our greater gods. We must beg Shango and Sobo to send these things back to where they came from. All of us must work together or it can't be done. That is why I am here with these white men.'

The sign talkers paused in their frantic translations, not sure how to translate Shango and Sobo, until Lem said, 'The Thunder Brothers.' Oh, said everyone. The first time she'd heard his voice in five years and he spoke of gods of thunder and lightning. The

Thunder Brothers. Grandfather Thunder.

Ah. The Thunderbird.

From behind the altar, two of the Dog-soldiers came round carrying an object draped in an old US army blanket, a power hidden even from itself, beneath mundane trappings of a bygone era.

'You have all heard of the sacred drum,' Growing Thunder said as the very drum itself was uncovered. He paused, waiting as reactions rolled over the room and settled down again. 'Few of you have heard it played. It has not been played for many years. Many new drums were made from it, but none have the power of this one. Yellow Bird got it from a spirit person. He gave flesh for it.' Here the old man folded down the first and second fingers of his left hand. 'Some say the spirit-person was hiha'n winu'cala, the owl woman. I don't know. No one knows but Yellow Bird and he is long dead. But I remember the beat of this drum. It beats inside me like my own heart. And when it stops so will I stop. Yet I tell you now, it must stop. This drum must be silenced. But first we will use it to call these ghosts one final time.'

'Oh, well, now -' One of the white men, with florid face to match his red hair and scruffy beard, raised his hand with a nervous little laugh. 'That's - that's, you know, not exactly the plan.' Lem grabbed his arm and pulled it back down, but by the time translations had caught up with those who hadn't understood the English, all attention was aggressively directed his way. Lalla could feel it all around her, the same questions she was asking: What were these white men doing here? Who had brought them, who'd given them safe passage? Was this the precursor to betrayal, invasion, a repeat of what had gone before, trusted leaders forced to give in and give up?

Growing Thunder looked at his hands in his lap, then at the drum, then out at the group of great men assembled in the chapel of San Miguel. He shook his head and gave a little chuckle. 'There is a plan,' he said, 'that is the important thing.' He gestured, the smallest flick of a finger, and suddenly men were turning to look and a man with a thunderbird belt buckle was leaning in to say, 'That's your cue.'

Her cue.

Lalla Winishut stood up. She caught Lemuel Roth looking at her and didn't know what to make of his expression. She didn't know

what to make of any of this, and focused instead on the altar screen above the Lakota chief, the portraits of St. Teresa of Ávila, and St. Gertrude the Great.

'Yeah,' she began, stopped and cleared her throat, 'yeah, well, sorry, it's just … nobody told me anything about a plan.'

A few years back when the second wave of ghosts (backed by Indians in army tanks) pushed the whites farther to the extremes of east and west, a multi-tribal women's coalition had petitioned tribal leaders to put a prohibition on the white man's liquor. Whiskey and beer made Indian men and women behave badly. It severed the connection to the Great Spirit and Earth Mother. It continued to wreak havoc on traditions and families, even with the whites out of the picture. It was the direct cause of fights, murder, rape, prostitution, and disease. They demanded it be outlawed. But the Apache had argued that the tiswin they made from maize was used in ceremonies and was just as important to their worship as the tobacco pipe was to others. If there were plans to ban alcohol they would draft petitions to ban tobacco as well, since that could also be abused to the point of death. The Iroquois pointed out that they'd just started a small industry in maple sap products, one of which was a traditional maple brandy, and lobbied for an exemption. And then the Pueblos mentioned that they liked to serve a drink made from agave pulque at weddings and births and such. That was almost tradition so they'd need an exemption also. Eventually the tribal leaders ruled that mild alcoholic beverages produced from local resources for traditional and/or ceremonial uses would be all right.

Which was great, because in a gathering this large policing its consumption was impossible. Even in the smallest gatherings folks liked to imbibe in a ceremonial dram or two, then belt out a few songs, and dance till they dropped. The lack of drumming brought with it a pervasive communal anxiety, thus the need to laugh and sing and be with loved ones.

Adherence to the restrictions on drumming was holding up, but nobody could not dance! You could make drums with your feet and your hands, so that's what they did.

Powwows and meet-ups of this kind were how young people met potential mates, where people saw family that had married and moved away, friends they hadn't seen for ages. This was where folks

tried to outshine each other and win praise and prizes with the intricacy of their beadwork, the spectacle of their feathered headdresses and bustles, the beauty of their squash blossom necklaces and turquoise belt buckles, the perfect placement of jingles on a dress, the skill of their weaving and softness of their wool, the fierceness of their war paint; their accuracy with bow, gun, spear, horse-racing, drag-racing, wrestling or footwork; the perfection of roasted corn, elk jerky, fry bread, gossip, songs, trades and giveaways. And in the evening when the couples-dances started up, roaming bands of unsupervised teenagers went from dance to dance to dance, sneak-drinking corn liquor and maple syrup wine along the way.

Lem and Lalla were not teenagers, though he could tell by the way she closed her eyes and swayed between sips that she wished they still were. He would have loved it too, and if it were ten years ago they'd be dancing right now. As it was, his presence and the presence of the men he was with had caused enough of a stir when they shared fry bread and hominy stew from a food stall earlier. So he kept her to the fringes, drinking wine from paper cups as they walked along the river. He'd asked about her brother ('huge') and how her granddad was holding up ('the same, you know'), and now stood with her in awkward silence on an old railway truss bridge.

Finally, she turned to him. 'Tell me.'

He didn't ask for clarification, knew she didn't want to hear more about Project Thunderbird. She wanted to know about him. Where he'd been? How he'd been.

He took a deep breath and let it out again, not knowing where to start. Campfires dotted the darkness, seeming to stretch infinitely, blending into the stars overhead. The smell of roasting meat, and juniper, pinewood smoke, and the crisp, charged, cool of the surrounding foothills filled him with nostalgia even though he'd never been to Santa Fe before the mission that brought him here. He listened to the glug of the water and the burble of human voices broken by sparks of laughter, the rise and fall of heated debates, the airy whine of flutes, children screeching and whooping, mothers singing, babies wailing. He hadn't been to a powwow in over eight years. Didn't realize how much he'd missed it. He wanted to cry. But he began with a laugh.

'I was seasick for a week. Ended up in Edinburgh because, apparently, that's where my people were from once. I guess I was

one of the lucky ones.' He put air quotes around that last and then realized it looked like he was making the signs for 'inferior' and 'buffalo.'

'Lucky?' And oh those big black eyes, catching the light of stars and fires. She seemed all eyes to him then, with her gleaming hair pulled back from her forehead into a sleek ponytail that brushed her back every time she moved. She claimed the style was practical, but he knew she thought it made her look serious and capable – no-nonsense Lalla. The ache of nostalgia didn't abate until she said, 'Did you feel lucky?'

'Why would you ask me that? You know I didn't want to leave. I didn't even know any other white people until Father Mike. Hell, I never left Rosebud until your dad took me to Pendleton that spring.'

The spring he'd met Lalla. He'd just turned ten.

She turned away, pulled her coat tighter around her as she stared out over the water. 'You were a ransom baby. You were always going to be returned to your people one day.'

Yeah. Once the relatives who'd given him over had performed whatever function was required. But not one person of the Seven Nations Sioux ever talked about it when they were raising him as one of their own.

'Like I said, lucky me.'

'Lem, no, I didn't mean –'

'Yeah, it's okay. Not important right now.'

It would be important later if they survived this mad plan, he realized. Rumours (and some hard-won intelligence) had it that white people were being used as slave labour in Michigan, and, very likely, in the oil refineries in Ponca City. If Project Thunderbird succeeded that situation would have to be addressed. It could get very unpleasant. He knew what kind of weapons were in development elsewhere in the world.

'When I was sent across the big water lots of whites were still stuck on the Eastern seaboard waiting for passage. You have to be able to prove heritage these days and even then...'

*something here.

There's a huge scarcity of resources in most of the European countries because of all the refugees. Though I understand a lot of you here are feeling the effects now.'

'They scare the sheep,' she said softly, then stirred beside him, as if coming out of her own reverie. 'So, tell me about the Jacks and

Black.'

Jacks and Black, his companions – Sergeant Jack Lewis, the scruffy red-headed mission specialist with the British Royal Corps of Signals, Dr Jacques Vreeland, pale and paunchy bespectacled physicist from Brussels, and Dr. Gedulien Black, the thin, elegant and very dark-skinned meteorologist from Haiti.

'He's actually a weather man?'

'He's also our voodoo man,' Lem said. 'The druids couldn't come.'

She barked a laugh, but at his expression, swallowed the rest of her mirth. 'Oh wait, you're serious.'

'Yeah.' They fell into silence again, pretending to look at stars and water then turned to each other at the same time, mirrored images of arms resting on the cedar guard rails, eyes gazing longingly into eyes, searching for signs of who they'd been. Lalla proved to be the same in at least one regard. Direct as ever. 'And what man are you?'

'I'm the lightning rod man.'

'Not much changed then.' She reached out, cupped his cheek. Her hand was cold.

Her lips weren't.

The borrowed pick-up truck wound its way up the Scenic Byway, headlamps catching the hulking forms of ponderosa pine one moment, and the edge of some black abyss the next. Shoni Winishut sat squeezed between Dr. Vreeland and Dr. Black, while Sergeant Lewis and Cheyenne Bill huddled in the bed of the truck, whipped by cold winds. Lewis clung to his signalling equipment. Bill gripped the sides with one hand, and held a Navajo rug closed around him with the other.

For the greater cause, for the good of human kind, Shoni had overcome a kneejerk sense of propriety and heaps of trepidation to venture out in the night with strange men from lands she'd never see. It was breathtakingly thrilling she had to admit, although the breathlessness might be due in some measure to the unaccustomed altitude.

An hour's journey brought them to this turnout and a scenic overlook. With nothing but the hissing light of the headlamps, a spattering of stars and a half-waned moon to see by, the city of Santa Fe looked like it was lit by fireflies, the flicker of a thousand campfires and the white pinpricks of electric bulbs.

Closer to their vantage point, just north and a bit west of the city

laid a broad stretch of canyon. Over this patch a strangely glowing, shifting haze of smoke moved like sheets on a line, rippling, parting and coming together again.

'Hungry ghosts,' Dr. Black said, 'playing at war.' He turned to Lewis who had a machine strapped to his chest of the sort Lalla used, with a wand attached to a curly wire. 'That's where we should set up the ultrasonic transducers, don't you think?'

'It's awfully close to the city, Gedu,' Vreeland said coming up behind them. 'I'm not sure there's enough distance to establish a safe perimeter.'

'They didn't have a safe perimeter at Wounded Knee,' Lewis noted.

Vreeland shook his head. 'It hasn't been established with any certainty that is where the creatures first manifested.'

'I've been there, mon ami. I assure you, it is. And besides, this is what the Dog-men are for, yes?' He smiled at Bill whose tattooed mouth ticked up one corner in response.

'They can't be inside the perimeter,' Lewis said. 'There's going to be a live mesocyclone in there!'

Bill tensed at this. But Shoni knew it wasn't out of any fear. He was insulted by the implications that he should be afraid. The two white men looked horrified on his behalf nonetheless.

Dr. Black locked gazes with Bill for a second then turned to his companions, explaining with his customary cheerful patience. 'Dog-soldiers are, without doubt, amongst the fiercest warriors that ever walked this earth. It is their greatest honour to fight the enemies of their people. They'll make certain none of the creatures can escape the cordon we set.'

Shoni stole a look at the Cheyenne whose secret true name was known only to him. She imagined him painted and dressed for battle, his warrior's sash staked to the ground so that he couldn't move unless a fellow warrior released him from his pledge to slay all comers or die where he stood. What she didn't know is how he would be able to stop a ghost. No one could fight them. That was the point.

'Why am I here?' Shoni blurted out.

Dr Black spun about, suddenly remembering her, sputtering his apologies. 'Forgive me ma'am chère. You are integral to this plan. It is your magic that first pulled the creatures into those traps your niece designed.'

'My medicine requires flesh offerings. You do know that, right?

Blood. That's how it works.'

'Honey for the traps. Qui.'

'But – the whole world?' The scope of it was boggling. 'How can we – my medicine isn't big enough for that –'

He took her hand and clasped it between his. 'No, no, my dear lady. We need only concern ourselves with this little patch of the world and trust that everyone everywhere else is tending to theirs.' He looked out over the foothills to the canyon below. 'What we have discovered, you see, is that these creatures need the history of a people and their connection to place in order to manifest.'

The longer a people had been part of the place, he told her, the easier it was for the ghosts to dig in their claws. White men didn't have much history on the prairie or the plains or in the badlands or in any of the forests and mountains they destroyed for profit. Ten thousand years and more had come down before white men arrived. That history and those bones were what the creatures used to first to climb up into the world of the living. It had been relatively easy to drive the white men away from those places. Harder on the eastern seaboard where the white descendants of Dutch and English still clung to the skins of their cities, surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers. In Texas and down into Mexico the 'ghosts' of Spaniards and Mayans and Aztecs did battle while the living tried to keep their heads down and go about their business. This was not a good way for any human being to thrive.

'In England and parts of Europe the ghosts of white men rule, but the living men themselves barely scratch an existence from the ground. It is the same in Africa where all those former slaves returned. Now the ghosts fight endless battles with each other while children go hungry. It's the same everywhere and getting worse. We know these ghosts aren't any part of us and that they never were.' He gestured expansively, one arm thrown wide to encompass where they stood and also below where they would create the trap. 'We chose this place in this country because it's where the Pueblos revolted against the Spanish incursion and won.'

For a while, Shoni thought, but then the Spaniards came back. 'Why not Wounded Knee? That's where it started.'

'We considered it. Many were adamant that where it began so should it end. But we haven't yet determined the level of awareness these creatures have. One moment they seem cognizant of our actions and the next moment mindless automatons. We feared we'd

show our hand if we set the trap there.' He squeezed her hand firmly, as if reminding himself of fleshy reality, and gave it a little shake before releasing it. 'Chief Growing Thunder was right, though. A door between our world and some other was torn open at Wounded Knee, formed out of a great depth of misery and hopelessness. It was the most ruthless appropriation of suffering imaginable. We've been invaded by a parasite that is devouring the roots of our histories and the bones of our dead. But this is our world, Shoni Winishut. They can't have our bones. We won't let them, will we? With your help we shall send them back to the hell from whence they came. Let our ancestors have heaven again, yes?'

He stooped a little next to her, to bring his face even with hers as they looked out over the canyon where the strange haze shifted. 'There,' he said softly.

She blinked and a slit opened in the air, a bright aperture in the night. Shadows shaped like candle flames pulled twisted branches and tumbleweeds through the slit. They gathered moulted snake skins and the skulls of long-horned cattle, feathers and bones, gold teeth and chunks of turquoise like magpies building nests –

She blinked again and the images were gone.

'There,' he said again. 'That is where we'll put on a show so grand the Thunder Brothers themselves will dance and shout 'Heya!' He grinned and for a moment all she could see was the gleam of his teeth and the glint in his eyes.

'It's called a supercell thunder storm,' Lem said, his voice lazy soft and much too self-satisfied. 'That's the biggest most spectacular mesocyclone you've ever seen.'

'Can't say I've seen one to compare,' Lalla mumbled into his chest.

'They get some fantastic supercells around here. A couple of scientists in England figured out how they form. Dr. Black figured out how to recreate the conditions. We're building a trap, Lalla. Like your traps only much, much bigger. And we're going to do it all over the planet. Trap them all and send them back where they came from.'

'With a thunder storm?'

'Several thousand actually, coordinated to occur at approximately the same time in all time zones, when the door between worlds is wafer thin and easy to open – uh, sometime between Falling Leaf and Beaver moon.'

'All Hallow's Eve, you mean? Stop being coy. We went to the same Catholic mission school.' She considered a moment. 'So… wait now, even in the southern hemisphere?'

'Well, Australia wasn't entirely committed last I heard, but hopefully.'

'That's just two weeks from now. How are you going to make sure it happens at the same time everywhere?'

'It's more of a cascade effect really, as I understand it. And that's what the signal man is for. Jack Lewis.'

'And the other guy?'

'Dr. Vreeland? He's the one who figured out where the ghosts came from and how to send them back once we've got them snared. He's the physics to our metaphysics.' His arm tightened around her for a moment, then relaxed. 'We've been working on this plan for a couple of years now.'

Two years. Almost as long as she'd been she'd been building her ghost traps. Her little traps that caught one or two or … who knew how many, how could she tell? Not enough to make a dent anyway. Nothing like what they were planning.

Whatever brief flush of pride she'd felt at being recognized, chosen, fell away. She'd stupidly flattered herself that she been called to Many Nations to consult with great leaders about her discoveries, her inventions, that her expertise would be needed. And now it seemed she was merely part of a worldwide zeitgeist. Humiliation gave rise to petty irritation. 'Probably won't want to use my designs. They need flesh offerings to set them properly. You know, blood.'

'That's why this Meet is so big,' he began with obvious excitement, but then the hand stroking her arm slowed and stilled. He drew in a sharp breath and suddenly his fingers were skittering up and down along the inside of her left arm from elbow to wrist. 'Jesus,' he said, feeling all the little cuts and raised scars he hadn't seen in the dark, ignored in the rush of lust the hash marks of counted-coups in ghosts; each slash the price of experimentation, the medicine to set the traps. He made a little sound, a tiny exhalation, 'Oh, Lalla.'

She pulled away, anger bubbling up, and she wasn't even sure why. 'Yeah, well that's the price of it.'

'I know. I know. It's just- It's hard for me to imagine how much you've carried on your own.'

She wanted to tell him it hadn't been a burden at all. It had been

exciting. The trial and error experimentation, the real and proper application of scientific method, tests, tests and more tests until she got it right every time – all the stuff Father Mike used to bang on about when they were in school. She said none of that, sat up instead, patting around in the dark for her dress, her underwear, the blanket coat, shivering like crazy, and only partly from the cold. 'Don't see how we're going to get every human being on the planet to give a drop of blood for this project. I mean the logistics of that –'

He sat up too, worried, unable to read her tone. 'We don't need everyone, just a large enough representational sampling. Like I said, that's why this Meet had to be such a big one. Anyway, we've done all the ground work. I think we've covered most contingencies.'

'Yeah, I'm sure you fellas have it all figured out. Laboratories in Scotland, German engineers –'

'Uh, well, Vreeland is Belgian and not an engineer as such.'

'No, of course, he's a physicist. Much better. It's just, you know, here, in the good old U.S. of All Confederated Tribes and Nations, pretty much me, just me and Aunt Shoni. We had to figure it out by ourselves. We didn't have lab facilities –'

'In Scotland. Right.' He shoved bare feet into his trouser legs and then wriggled gracelessly to get them up over his backside. Zipped up the fly in heedless fury. 'Maybe you shouldn't have packed us all up and shipped us overseas then.'

'You know Umatilla didn't have anything to do with that!'

'Yeah, yeah, nothing to do with slaves working the refineries in Oklahoma and Texas either I suppose.'

'Take that up with the Cherokee and Chickasaw. We just raise sheep and catch fish where I'm from.'

'Christ, Lalla. God damn it! I know there are huge differences between horse cultures and fishing cultures and the… horticultures. I grew up here. I'm not so white I've forgotten how I was raised, okay? But, right now? We have to be humans, united. So, if you can't get on board, if you have no desire to share your considerable contribution to this cause, then give your drop of blood like everyone else and get out of the way.'

It was quite an impassioned speech to give while crawling on his hands and knees but as that was the only way to get out of the tent he had no choice. He pushed open the flap. The sob caught in her throat escaped despite her best efforts.

'I didn't want you to go, never, never!' she wailed, spilling tears she

must've been saving up for eight long years. The remnants of her sleeked-back ponytail stuck out every which way, full of static, adding insult to injury. 'None of us wanted you to go. Daddy sent you to live with us so they wouldn't find you. So they couldn't trade you back.'

He sighed and the interior of the tent fell dark again as the tent flap dropped. All the anger he'd been saving up for eight long years seemed to dissolve as well. He scooted over next to the soggy heap of Lalla, and they leaned against each other until the sun came up.

In the morning, John Sohappy took Lem aside while the two Winishut women were getting their goods out of the back of his car.

'You think this is going to work?' he asked. Lem hoped he was referring to the Thunderbird Project, but that hope was quashed quickly. 'Because I can tell you right now, there's no way any of you whites are coming back here, no matter what happens.'

'Okay.' He recalled years ago, a younger John Sohappy coming to his rescue when Woody Chalakee and Tom Hines were beating the shit out of him behind Sohappy's Dry Goods. That John Sohappy had a lot more hair. 'I don't need to come back.'

'Glad to hear it.'

Lem ticked his head Lalla's direction. 'Maybe I'll just take her with me.'

'Like hell you will!'

'Looks like you boys got your fur up,' Aunt Shoni shouted over at them as she shook out a Chief Joseph blanket. 'Sure hope it's not over something neither of you can lay claim to.'

Lalla, standing next to the cavernous boot of the Cadillac was mortified. There was a big suitcase at her feet already. She reached in to pull out another case, but then hesitated, biting her lip.

'Is it too heavy for you darlin'?' John Sohappy said, rushing to assist.

'No!' she cried, slapping his arms away. 'Leave it. I don't - I don't need it.' But Lem was there too all the sudden and looking in the trunk–

'What do you mean you don't need it?' His expression was amused astonishment. 'Isn't that your portfolio?'

'Her what?'

'And your old ghost tracker!' Lem was smiling big and broad, right on the edge of laughing outright as he reached for the cobbled

together equipment.

Lalla covered her eyes with a groan. Her cheeks were on fire, and she couldn't look him, or any of them in the eye. 'Yeah, I thought maybe the Council could get some ideas from my- what I'd done - but you don't- I mean nobody needs- I mean you've figured it out so no need to drag all that stuff around since nobody needs to see it.'

'Are you kidding?' Lem exclaimed. 'I'm dying to see it.' He left the tracking device where it was to pull out the big carryall instead, full of rolled up, rubber-banded technical schematics, and notebooks crammed with computations and formulas, and scribbled scraps of paper with crazy weird side notes. 'No, please,' she begged, tugging the mess out of his grasp and crushing it to her chest. 'Please don't.'

He stared at her, confusion then worry overtaking his excitement. 'But this is why you're here.'

'Stop. Really. It's okay. You don't need to -' She shook her head, her throat tight, her whole body flushed with shame. 'Honestly, I'm happy to observe if you'll let me. I mean I want to help. Whatever I can do, you know.'

'This - is - what you can do.'

'But these aren't -they're not exactly professional, they're, they're downright amateurish, if you must know. Correspondence school isn't like a real university or anything.' Please don't put me in a position to be mocked, please, please if you love me at all-

'Lalla. Your research, the work you did, the traps you and Aunt Shoni built, that's the only reason any of us have a chance in hell of pulling this off. Because you already did.'

All the medicines had to come together, all the power paths and circles and lines had to meet just so in order for the storm Dr. Black and his team were creating to stir science and magic together in the pot of the canyon. They'd determined a radius of twenty-eight miles to be the smallest surface area that could possibly contain the storm, and had set up the ultrasonic transducers to mark it, and to drive as many of the other living beings as they could out of the danger zone and hopefully, keep them away. The snakes and scorpions were not well pleased and had made their displeasure known over the past few days.

In the centre of this area, on a low mesa, stood Lem's lightning rod, a massive metal pole shaft cemented deep into the ground. It wasn't expected to make it through the storm intact, but it only needed to function long enough to do one job. Near the top,

suspended by cables, a massive hoop made of copper encircled the pole. From this hoop hung hundreds of Lalla Winishut's spiral ghost catchers, like so many corkscrew kites - yellow, red, black, white – sacred colours spinning in the wind. Forty-nine paces out from the lightning rod, set in a rough circle were forty-nine massive basalt rocks. Forty-nine Dog soldiers would pin their sashes to the rocks with pitons. Forty nine was the number they themselves had chosen. A scared number. Holy and powerful.

There'd been a lot of ghost activity in the days leading up to this day, and just last night two boys had been frightened off a cliff in the dark by the sudden looming form of Geronimo. One did not survive and the other seriously injured.

By midmorning, Shoni Winishut and twelve other medicine men and women had collected blood – a scant two and half pints representing over twenty thousand men, women, and children – and mixed it with hirudin from leeches to keep it from coagulating before it was needed. By noon most of the women and children were headed, as planned, to the Santo Domingo Pueblo. The drummers were warming up, and the Dog-men were in an undisclosed location, engaged, no doubt, in secret ceremonies.

Lalla sat in Lem's tent doing her own praying – to Grandmother Spider of their Navajo hosts, to the spirit of auntie's Wowshuxkluh, to the sacred and divine mystery of her father's people, Wakan Tanka, to the black west where the Thunderbird lived, and for good measure, to St. Teresa, St. Gertrude and Jesus Navareno. She stroked the fringe of her mother's two-hide dress, its yoke thick with beadwork, so heavy on her body, and yet comforting and familiar. She could almost feel her mother's arms around her and hear the steady beat of her heart.

She banded her hair at the nape and went outside to embrace whatever came. Happily, the first thing that came was Lem, who squished her into a hug, pulled back to sweep his eyes over her then embraced her again. 'You look amazing. You have to talk to your aunt.'

She extricated herself with mock distress, smoothed her hair. 'Thanks. And why?'

'She's baking bread!'

Lalla broke into laughter. 'That's how you know everything's going to work out. Don't you remember?'

'I remember she was baking bread when they took me away.'

She put her hand on his chest, the flat of her palm over his heart. 'And here you are back again.'

'Oh. Ah.' He placed a hand over her hand, pressing hers hard against his chest like he wanted her to grab hold of his heart and carry it safely away with her, away from this crazy thing they were setting in motion. And she wanted to, kind of really wanted to just take off running with his heart, like Deer Woman and he'd have to follow after her then, follow his heart through fields, across the river, into the forest that used to be and into the mountain of Grandfather Thunder himself, where they'd live forever and ever safe in the spirit world. If his heart was safe, if Aunt Shoni was baking bread, if if if…

She blinked and shook her head as if to shake away all the ifs and maybes. He looked at her, brow dug deep in worry – and other things it seemed. He pulled her close crushing their hands between their bodies, and then kissed her with the sort of earnest, tender, yearning passion she'd only read of in English romance novels. Maybe that's one of the things he'd learned over there. Felt nice though. More than nice.

Then he had to go ruin it. 'I guess you'd best head on to the pueblo now.'

She pulled back from him her mind besotted with kisses. 'Why would I do that?'

He looked at her like she was being wilfully obtuse. 'That's where the women and children are going. You know, for protection?'

'Aunt Shoni isn't going.'

'That's different. She has to be here. It's her medicine. She's responsible for it.'

'My traps! I'm responsible for those too you know. '

'Oh come on, Lalla! I designed the lightning rod and I'm not going to be standing next to it.'

'No, you're going to be in the hills throwing switches with the rest of the white men.'

It was a low blow, meant to scare him off or make him mad enough to leave her to her business. He didn't take the bait.

'Fine. Come with me.'

'I need to be at the ceremony!'

'They won't let you participate.'

'Auntie needs me there.'

'She never said that.'

'That's because she doesn't know it yet. I have to be there.' She pushed at him. 'Go. Go. You go do what you have to do. You know the old men'll never let me get out of a car let alone into the ceremonial circle. I just feel like I should be close.'

He searched her eyes a moment then nodded. It was only when he let go of her hand did she realize how hard he'd been squeezing it. With a final glance over his shoulder, he walked toward a clutch of cars crouched like rabbits under a juniper tree. She saw his hand come out the window in a final wave as he turned and drove towards the mountains.

It was decided they would begin the way a powwow always began: a couple of hours before sunset with the Grand Entry at the east-facing demarcation of the medicine wheel.

With binoculars, and from their vantage point, Lem, Jacques Vreeland and a few others involved in the technical aspects, followed the befuddling chaos in the canyon of cars parked at weird angles, and men milling purposefully about until, at some signal, the slow dignified procession into a huge, mostly symbolic circle commenced. This circle was at the base of the mesa where the lightning rod stood in its ring of stones. Farther out at the southwest edge of this huge twenty-eight mile medicine wheel they'd made, the first stirrings of a wind shear had set the air spinning, bending it into an updraft that would manifest as Shango and Sobo, the Thunder Brothers. Dr. Black was out there somewhere. And somewhere else Sergeant Lewis was waiting for the signal that would trigger the relay of signals all over the planet.

The Navajo, as hosting nation, carried in the eagle staff followed by the oldest warrior in attendance, Growing Thunder. Delegations from all the tribes and nations came after with their own flags and staffs and symbols with drummers and song-makers interspersed. After this, the women would usually enter the circle but there was only one this time. Lem could just make out Shoni and even with binoculars he was only making an assumption. He couldn't be sure the figure he saw was even a woman. He couldn't see any shape resembling Lalla and thought she might be in one of the waiting cars.

The plan was that when all the representatives had entered, Growing Thunder would lead prayers and then the head drum – the sacred drum – would start beating out the ghost dance. The men

would dance until the ghosts began to gather at which point everyone would beat a hasty, less than ceremonial retreat, pile into their cars and trucks and drive like crazy back to Santa Fe.

As no one was sure if it was an honour or a death sentence or both, every drummer who'd come to Many Nations drew stones to see who'd be the one to play the sacred drum. A young Jemez Pueblo guy named Jerry Madalena had gotten the white stone and he began with a shout and the first beat. The other drums picked it up and the men and lone woman began the ghost dance, shuffling and sliding sideways along the path of the sun.

In the foothills above the canyon, the whining wind was a steady white noise punched hard by drum beats. All the drums were going now, a kind of rolling thunder of its own, drowning out the voices. The sacred drum given to Yellow Bird eighty-two years ago was loudest of all, each beat an explosion that rent the air. The sun sank lower and still they played. Still they danced.

One by one, like threads of steam, ghosts rose up out of the dirt inside the circle. Others came tumbling out of the speckled sky above the drums.

Suddenly one of the dancers dropped to the ground, and then another - overtaken by exhaustion? Succumbing to visions?

This was not in the plan.

Lem pulled the binoculars away then immediately held them up to his eyes again, adjusting the magnification

'Looks like the chief's down,' Vreeland said beside him. 'And – is that- ? Oh damn. It's the medicine woman!'

The ghosts seemed to hesitate, hovering, vibrating like bees before a swarm. The drummers stuttered in their rhythms, shaken, then picked the beats up again and drummed as they ran. The two who'd fallen were gathered up and carried in a stumbling jog west, towards the grand entry marked by eagle staffs.

A figure got out of a car and stated running towards the dancers. Lem knew with his bare eyes and by the terrible thud of his heart in his throat that the figure was Lalla, fringes and hair flying

Men poured out of the sacred hoop, flowing around her like a creek around a rock. The men carrying the old man between them moved past her, but the man carrying her aunt Shoni paused. He couldn't tell who it was, but it seemed as if the man was trying to grab her back. After a moment, he hurried past as well.

When everyone was beyond the marked perimeter, the staffs were

jerked out of the ground and the last of the men dove into the last of the vehicles and chased the dust of those ahead of them.

Lalla was alone on the plain, one lone human being. Above her, and around her, the ghosts were circling lazily. Lem stared at her, one long suspended moment of dread and hope. Suddenly his ears popped. The breath left his lungs like he'd been punched. When he looked again, there was nothing on the plain but the whirling dust of ghosts.

Dr. Gedulien Black sat on a flat rock, the heat of the day already beginning to leach out of it. If he were a snake he would have moved already. Out here were all the wild things repelled by the ultrasonic barrier. They didn't bother him though. He'd already made them nervous with a tiny storm in a test tube and lighting in a bucket, miniatures of what Shango was stirring up inside the barrier.

Gedulien Black was a warrior of Shango. Soon the god would come down and strike him about the head and shoulders. Soon he'd be possessed, dancing and strutting and generally cutting a fine figure in his red shirt and white linen trousers. He was glad to be alone though, for as much as he was loathed to admit it, the ways of the god could occasionally undermine the dignity of a man of science.

He raised the solid staff of yellow cedar carved with the symbols of Shango and struck the thunderstone at his feet.

You didn't need binoculars to see the mesocyclone break through the anvil shaped clouds and overshoot the upper levels of the troposphere. It roiled and curled and puffed until it took on a shape that made everyone gasp - the head of a bird, a great bird of prey with a crest that swept back from its head. A sheet of virga hung like a shimmering wing beneath the forward shear and the whole mass moved with lumbering grace, seeming slow but covering so much ground so quickly that it was already dancing along the edge of the mesa.

Lem had tried to leave when he'd seen Lalla vanish, but Vreeland and the others tackled him and held him down until he'd stopped struggling. And now he felt … nothing. Or something like nothing, One step then the next step, and then it was over, no matter how it played out. It was over for him at any rate.

He brought the binoculars up now, tracking the movement of the

vehicles racing towards the city. It looked like they'd make it. The atmosphere all around him was charged with energy. Inside the cloud-mass lightning flared and waned, veins filled with luminescence. His chest expanded suddenly, a great heaving sorrow that he couldn't let loose. Lalla was lost and those men, those Dog-soldiers who'd staked their warrior sashes to the rocks might never get a chance to do battle. He turned his sight to the lightning rod that had seemed so grand when they erected it. He could barely make it out–

There! Something else over the mesa now, black-light swirls being sucked towards the traps.

Oh god oh god, the traps might work. They might actually work, he thought, and immediately loathed himself for it. Of course they worked. They were Lalla's traps. His throat tightened and he blinked back tears, turned to Vreeland and said, 'Okay, I think it's a go.' Vreeland toggled a series of switch and turned a key.

The anvil of the storm thrust itself over the mesa and a lightning bolt shot through the dome of the thunderbird cloud and into the copper ring.

It wasn't so bad at first. In fact it was pleasant, like twirling around in a tire swing pushed by angels. And then it got very bad very quickly.

Lem had been right. She shouldn't have gone. She shouldn't have gotten out of the car. Should never have gotten into it. But he was right only because he loved her and he wanted her to live.

She knew now that living was never part of her equation. The ghosts would have come for her anyway. They would have come for her on the mountain with Lem, or at the pueblo with the women and children, or in the midst of the ghost dance if she'd been allowed to dance. No one would have lived then. As soon as the drum called the ghosts sought her out and would have done so no matter where she was. They would have taken her, because hers was the blood they knew best, come down to her through her father, and grandfather all the way back to Yellow Bird who gave his flesh for a dream of salvation.

Lalla did the only thing she could think of. The only right thing. She ran into the ceremonial circle and called the ghosts. She raised her arms and the sleeves of her mother's two-skin dress fell away, revealing the marks of flesh offerings, some still raw on her arms.

The ghosts swept her up in their voraciousness, like exuberant children after a hard day's play, and carried her to the mesa where the blood traps enticed. They made of her a kite amongst the kites, spinning and drifting and slashed to ribbons by their curious teeth. Made one with them through the blood as the Thunderbird rose up and rushed across the mesa to annihilate them all.

Below, far below, Dogs whined and growled and jerked against their ropes trying to get to her, but by the time they got loose she was already on the soul-bridge on her way to the stars.

Here is what Growing Thunder saw before he walked on. The flap between the worlds blew all directions, so that no one knew which world was theirs and which belonged to someone else. It seemed a good opportunity to visit everywhere and have a look around. Time wasn't very important and so he could spend a lot of it. He travelled all directions with a thought, marvelling at the many strange persons and unusual places and interesting things. He visited the ghosts in their own lands and they did not seem so terrible there, a bit like raccoons with their love of collecting curiosities. He also saw where the spirit persons lived who had brought the drum to the Lakota. Though he was polite about it he thought their land was… just okay. They didn't take good care of it that was certain. For all that they were grand and glowed and could wear the faces of animals and other things they were bloodless creatures, which was probably why they liked blood so much.

When he was done visiting and seeing whatever he liked, he came back just as the flap was closing on all those other places, as if it had been waiting for him before it closed. The girl who made the kites was there, she looked as if she was trying to decide whether to go back through or stay where she was.

'Between the worlds when all the flaps have been tied shut, that is not a good place to be, little girl,' he told her. She looked as if she would cry then. She said, 'If I go back the ghost persons will follow me. They are like dogs that way.'

'Then you must let the bigger dogs put them in their place. That is how it is with dogs and ghosts.' He went through the flap. He didn't know if she followed him or not.

When Growing Thunder opened his eyes he could see the sun shining behind the darkened sky. The wind brushed his hair from his face like his mother had done once.

'That was fun,' he said to the little medicine woman and the others he couldn't quite remember. But there was nothing much left that needed saying after that so he closed his eyes again

Sergeant Jack Lewis drove west. 'I'll keep going 'til I get a signal.' He didn't say what he'd do if he never got one. Drove off into a darkness so dark the only light was his car's headlights. Not a star could get through, cloud cover thick and heavy it felt like the whole blessed world was hiding under a blanket, afraid to call attention to the fact that it was still breathing under there. But then dawn came crawling through, crept up on people almost without anyone realizing it, smoke grey softening into pale pewter. A few women came back with baskets of food for their exhausted men. Though no man had sent word it was safe for them to come no man said anything but thanks sweetheart.

Aunt Shoni brought Lem a loaf of the bread she'd made in a coffee can. That meant everything was going to be okay, right? She patted his hand, said nothing. He tore off a chunk and put it in his mouth but couldn't chew, could never have swallowed it. He spat it out as soon as she'd walked away.

It wasn't until late in the day when the tiny cyclones stopped popping up all over the place like pissed off badgers that they could head out to the mesa to see what was left.

The traps were all gone. There was no trace of any of them. But the massive steel pole of the lightning rod had been driven clean through one of the basalt rocks, chunks of cement still stuck to one end. Everyone stood around for a few moments, just pondering that until they began to notice other things, the shaft of a feather, strips of fur, scraps of bead work. Pieces of bodies. Of the big stones that had comprised the circle, some listed, many still stood, but most of them had tumbled, crushing the warriors who'd bound themselves to their mission with pitons and rawhide. Many of the stones still had the pitons embedded in them. The Dog soldiers had stayed the mission as everyone had known they would.

Men gathered what regalia and weapons of the Dog-soldiers they could find and made piles of it until they had forty nine piles. They sang mourning songs through the night and into the next day. And the morning after that when smoke from hundreds of cook fires was once again threading through a blue sky, something wonderful came limping across the little Bridge of the Hidalgos.

Cheyenne Bill, Dr Gedulien Black, and five of the missing Dog-soldiers walked into Santa Fe, bruised, bloodied, with skin and clothes missing, shredded or torn to ribbons. Bill was carrying the limp, but still breathing body of Lalla Winishut. As he handed her into the arms of Lemuel Roth and into the care of the medicine woman who was her aunt, Lalla stirred like a child awakening from nap. She said, 'Bill, Bill, did we put them in their place, big dog?'

He laughed. 'That we did, girl.' And then all the Dog men threw back their heads and whooped.

Playing For Time IX

Pink-silver-white light swells to flood the office.

In an instant Triphis changes completely, from, poised, gleeful, triumphant, to something more like a threatened praying mantis. She shrills in an inhuman voice, 'GET OUT!'

But the angel comes in. Tefen has the impression of a young man in a white sleeveless garment, poker face framed by sleek black hair, but it's as though he's seeing him from a distance, or glimpsing him at the back of an unfocussed photo. The picture won't stick.

The medical staff are cowering. Tefen shakily climbs down from his hospital bed.

The angel is taller than Triphis, but he stoops down to her, and she put her arms around him like a mother's around a child.

'Can you forgive me?' he whispers. 'Can you ever forgive me?'

'Don't look to me for purgation,' she murmurs back. 'It's more than I can accomplish.'

'Oh,' says the angel. 'Bollocks.'

Tefen realises that he will never understand this exchange. No – he decides he hopes he never understands it.

The angel disentangles himself from Triphis and is on the other side of the office, at the window, apparently looking down at the Earth. 'Is the ship's manual fully unlocked now?' he says.

'Yes,' says Tefen.

'Then it's time to give it to me.'

Triphis reaches out a hand to snatch up the gleaming ball, but Tefen picks it up first. She doesn't try to stop him. She only gives him a liquid brown look so full of sorrow that he nearly hands it to her.

Somehow or other Tefen makes it to the angel and holds the device out. He has the impression of its small weight being lifted from his hands.

'Now,' says the angel.

'Wait! Let it run,' says Tefen. 'This one needs to run. They know what we're doing. They're pooling their resources to resist. Look.'

The angel turns its attention to the interior of the ball. Tefen has the impression of a grin, bright as a magnesium flare. He shuts his eyes against it. 'It might be the best thing to come out of this,' he says.

'What do you want, Tefen?' says the angel. 'I'll give it to you.'

Tefen opens his eyes again. There's a trap behind those sweet words.

'Sweetheart,' says Triphis, touching his arm, breaking his heart. 'Save me.'

What's the safest way out, now? For all of them?

'I can find the tipping point I want... that we want. Can we unwind time? Make it that none of us were ever here?'

'Who is "we"?'

'All the human beings on board the ship.'

'No!' snarls Triphis, her fingers clawing into his flesh. 'Not me!' But what's she going to do about it?

'The red weed, too,' says Tefen. 'It was never here.'

Quiver is nodding, little jerks of his head with his eyes closed. Chrys says, 'Excuse me, but do we get a say in this?'

Tefen grins. 'Come on, mate. You'll still wash up somewhere comfortable. You might just have to work a little harder for it, that's all.'

'Hmph.'

Quiver says, tight-throated, 'What is it you're always saying, Chrys? We make our own heaven and hell?'

'Easily done,' the angel says. Its voice makes Tefen's head ring, like the feeling you're about to faint, like time is starting to slide under his feet already.

'Wait,' he says. 'Will we remember our time here?'

'No,' says the angel.

'Oh,' says Tefen. 'Oh. Thank God for that.'

At the edge of the midden, propped up against a crumbling wall, there were two cardboard boxes sewn tight together with discarded twist-ties. Inside, on a hospital gurney with no legs or wheels, lies a young man with startled light brown eyes and red-gold hair, wheezing.

Mestjet wears trousers which were probably once white. Although the decomposing garbage piled against the side of the boxes produces a constant background of heat, the night's turning cold, and he should probably put on his pullover. He can't seem to find the energy. Instead he folds his thin arms across his chest and closes his eyes.

There's the sound of shifting rubbish outside, forcing him to reach

out for the cast-iron frying pan, desperately holding in a cough. A moment later he hears the low whistle which means it's not medical students, but only Tefen.

The dark-eyed boy smiles as he slips inside their shelter and unhefts the basket from his back. 'I've got a present for you, love,' he says.

Mestjet doesn't smile. 'You do too much,' he says. His voice is a rasping whisper. 'I'm going to end up owing you more than I can pay.'

'Your turn will come,' says Tefen, feeling around in the basket, arm going almost all the way in to retrieve the wrapped package hidden under today's harvest of bits and pieces. 'An upright citizen threw the lid of a trash can at me today. Luckily she didn't know how fast I can dodge. It still ruffled my hair.'

Mestjet takes the package and unwraps the bit of rag protecting it.

'It's a breathing mask,' says Tefen. 'I got it fixed up for you – it only needed the filters changed and the strap repaired.'

Mestjet slips the mask over his mouth and nose, as though he's been given jewellery and wants to show the giver how it looks. Tefen reaches out to adjust the strap, but Mestjet stops his hand, pulling the strap into place himself.

'There,' says Tefen. 'Now, when we go out, it should at least be a bit easier to cope with the chemical fumes.'

Mestjet, his voice muffled, says, 'You idiot, you should keep -' The sentence trails off into coughing.

Tefen slides his arms around his lover's cool body. Mestjet presses himself against Tefen's skinny chest, and Tefen feels the odd outline of the mask where Mestjet's head rests on his shoulder. He holds his man until the coughing subsides, and then just holds him.

There's nothing to eat tonight and there probably won't be until at least tomorrow night, and the midden is cold and heavy with stink, and they are surrounded on all sides by enemies. But at this exact second in time, there is nowhere else that Tefen would rather be.

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